



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Keith Bain

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First Session

THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
GOVERNMENT BUSINESS:	
GOVERNMENT MOTIONS:	
Res. 581, Estimates: CW on Supply - Referred,	
Hon. A. MacMaster.....	5024
F. Tilley.....	5037
Adjourned debate	5039
SPEAKER’S RULINGS:	
Remarks from the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care that a statement by the member for Northside-Westmount was sexist did not constitute unparliamentary language (Point of Order by the Member for Northside-Westmount [Hansard p. 4965, March 22, 2023]).....	5041
TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS:	
Order in Council 2023-80 Dated March 21, 2023 Detailing Additional Appropriations Included in Final Forecast for Fiscal Year 2022-23, Hon. A. MacMaster.....	5042

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS:

No. 272, An Act to Amend Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2010, the Finance Act, L. Lachance.....	5042
--	------

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS:

Jarvis, David: We Feed Lunenburg Creation - Congrats., Hon. S. Corkum-Greek	5042
Daughter, Emily: Member is Proud of Her - Recog., Hon. D. Mombourquette	5043
Income Assistance: Need to Increase - Recog., G. Burrill	5043
MacDonald, Johnnie: Death of - Tribute, Hon. B. Comer	5044
Dupuis, Luc: Can. Winter Games Partic. - Recog., Hon. I. Rankin.....	5044
Mantley, Linda: Africville Commemoration - Recog., S. Hansen	5045
Wicks, Barbara: Scouts Can. Vol. Work - Thanks, Hon. B. Druhan	5045
Megan, Cassidy: Epilepsy Awareness Work - Recog., Hon. Z. Churchill	5046
Crichton Park: Food Donations - Thanks S. Leblanc	5046
Mundle, William: Death of - Tribute, E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5047
Hants East Tigers: Silver Medal Win - Congrats., J.A. MacDonald	5047
Organizers: N.S. Scholastic Chess Challenge - Congrats., Hon. K. Regan.....	5047
O'Flaherty, Keith: Lyme Dis. Diagnosis Efforts - Recog., K. Coombes.....	5048
U-18 Rams Hockey Team: Great Season - Recog., Hon. T. Rushton.....	5048
Paramedics: Need for Support - Recog., Hon. B. Maguire	5049
Ramadan: Muslim Celebration - Recog., L. Lachance.....	5049
Dill, Bobby: Death of - Tribute, M. Sheehy-Richard	5049
Ramadan: Muslim Celebration - Recog., A. Duale	5050
Income Assistance: Ont. Increase - Recog., G. Burrill.....	5050
Warren, Richie: Hockey Tourn. Founder - Thanks, J. White	5051
Wife, Elizabeth - Birthday Wishes, Hon. B. Jessome.....	5051

Hiles, John: Com. Serv. - Recog., S. Hansen	5051
Kent, Hannah: Lacrosse Achievements - Recog., K. Smith	5052
Giannoulis, Stephanie: Hotel Servs. - Congrats. R. DiCostanzo	5052
2SLGBTQIA+ Com.: Need for Prot. - Recog., S. Leblanc	5053
Deveau, Danielle: Retirement - Congrats., Hon. B. Wong	5053
Mother, Donna & Father: Birthday Wishes, F. Tilley	5054
Doucette, Erin: Rescue from Car Fire - Recog., K. Coombes.....	5054
Athletes: Winter Games Partic. - Congrats., N. Young.....	5054
Thibault, Denise: Can. Games Medal Win - Recog., R. LeBlanc	5055
Students: <i>Beauty and the Beast JR.</i> Production - Recog., L. Lachance.....	5055
Volunteers: Special Olympics N.S. - Thanks, Hon. P. Dunn.....	5056
CPAHS Students: Bask. Ch'ship Win - Congrats., B. Clark.....	5056
ArtWorks East: Support for Visual Arts - Congrats., Hon. G. Morrow.....	5056
Saxon, Dr. Michelle: Queen's Plat. Jub. Medal Recip. - Congrats., C. Kerr.....	5057
Starfish Reunites: Help For Immigrants - Recog., D. Barkhouse.....	5058
Waye, Joe: Queen's Plat. Jub. Medal Recip. - Congrats., Hon. D. Mombourquette.....	5058
Smith, Abigail: Can. Games Medal Win - Congrats., Hon. K. Masland.....	5058
Income Assistance: Need to Increase - Recog., Hon. K. Regan.....	5059
Paul, Rose: Inclusion in <i>Atl. Bus. Mag.</i> List - Congrats., Hon. M. Thompson.....	5061
Athletes: Can. Winter Games Perf. - Congrats., Hon. B. Maguire	5061
Pictou West Food Bank Voluns.: Com. Serv. - Thanks, Hon. K. MacFarlane.....	5061
Eustaquio-Domondon, Elizabeth: QPJ Medal Recip. - Congrats., R. DiCostanzo.....	5062
Scantlebury, Maj. Lydia: Military Career - Recog., T. Boudreau.....	5062

Four Com. Grps.: Com. Serv. - Recog., F. Tilley.....	5063
Steadman, Brooke: QPJ Medal Recip. - Congrats., C. Palmer.....	5063
Clare Loups: Hockey Ch'ship Win - Congrats., R. LeBlanc	5064
MLA for Glace Bay-Dominion - Birthday Wishes, Hon. B. Comer	5064
ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS:	
No. 925, Prem.: Power Grid Strength - Ensure, Hon. Z. Churchill	5065
No. 926, Prem.: Primary Care Access - Expand, C. Chender	5067
No. 927, Prem.: Province's Problems - Act, Hon. Z. Churchill	5068
No. 928, NRR: Power Rates - Control, C. Kerr.....	5070
No. 929, FTB: Cost of Living Relief - Provide, Hon. K. Regan.....	5071
No. 930, DHW: Importance of Paramedics - Recog., S. Leblanc	5072
No. 931, MAH: Property Taxes - Freeze, Hon. D. Mombourquette.....	5073
No. 932, FTB: Excessive Spending - Justify, B. Clark.....	5074
No. 933, DCS: Basic Needs - Support, Hon. B. Jessome.....	5075
No. 934, MAH: Affordable Non-Market Housing - Support, S. Hansen	5076
No. 935, FTB: Tax Brackets - Index, Hon. B. Maguire	5077
No. 936, SNSIS: Higher Vacancy Rate - Commit, B. Clark.....	5078
No. 937, FTB: Indexing Income Tax Brackets - Consider, E. Smith-McCrossin.....	5080
No. 938, DCS: Income Assistance Payments - Raise, K. Coombes.....	5081
No. 939, OAMH: Housing for Young People - Action, R. DiCostanzo	5082
GOVERNMENT BUSINESS:	
PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING:	
No. 264, Electricity Act (amended), Hon. T. Rushton.....	5084
C. Kerr.....	5084
S. Leblanc	5086
Hon. T. Rushton.....	5087

Vote - Affirmative.....	5087
No. 256, Patient Access to Care Act,	
Hon. M. Thompson.....	5088
Hon. B. Maguire	5090
S. Leblanc	5104
Hon. M. Thompson.....	5105
Vote - Affirmative.....	5105
No. 269, Construction Projects Labour Relations Act (amended),	
Hon. J. Balsler.....	5106
Hon. K. Regan.....	5107
K. Coombes.....	5108
Hon. J. Balsler.....	5108
Vote - Affirmative.....	5108
No. 263, Public Utilities Act (amended),	
Hon. T. Rushton.....	5109
C. Kerr.....	5110
S. Leblanc	5110
Hon. T. Rushton.....	5111
Vote - Affirmative.....	5111
ADJOURNMENT, House rose to meet again on Friday, Mar. 24 th at 9:00 a.m.	5112



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Keith Bain

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Angela Simmonds, Lisa Lachance, Kent Smith, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. As is the tradition on Budget Day in this House, with the unanimous consent of the House we will commence with the motion for Resolution No. 581 respecting the Estimates under Orders of the Day. This means that the daily routine will be deferred until after the response to the Budget Speech is adjourned. Question Period will then begin one hour after the start of the daily routine.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

[ORDERS OF THE DAY]

[GOVERNMENT BUSINESS]

[GOVERNMENT MOTIONS]

[Res. No. 581, re Estimates - CW on Supply: Referred - notice given Mar. 21/23 - (Hon. Allan MacMaster)]

With that consent, I will now recognize the honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. (Applause)

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the notice of motion given by me on March 21, 2023, and the Rules and Forms of Procedure of the House of Assembly, I have the honour, by command, to present a message from His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Nova Scotia relating to the Estimates of Sums required for the service of the Province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024, which is:

“I hereby transmit Estimates of Sums required for the Public Service of the Province for the year ending March 31, 2024, and in accordance with the Constitution Act of 1867, recommend them, together with the Budget Address of my Minister of Finance and Treasury Board and any resolutions or bills necessary or advisable to approve the Estimates and implement the budget measures to the House of Assembly.”

Signed,

Arthur J. LeBlanc

Lieutenant Governor”

Mr. Speaker, at this time I wish to:

(1) table the message from His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Nova Scotia transmitting the Estimates for the consideration of this House;

(2) table the Estimate Books;

(3) table the government business plan;

(4) table the Estimate resolutions;

(5) deliver my Budget Speech; and

(6) move that the Estimates of Sums Required for the service of the Province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024, being Supply to be granted to His Majesty, be referred to the Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

THE SPEAKER: The Estimates are tabled.

The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I am pleased to present the 2023-24 Provincial Budget.

INTRODUCTION

This budget is about empowering people. When people are empowered, they feel more in control and more optimistic about their future.

This budget does just that. It focuses on three main areas:

- Action for Health Care - our strategic plan to grow the health care workforce and get Nova Scotians faster access to the care they need.
- A Healthy Economy - which helps to pay for the health care system Nova Scotians deserve and lays the foundation for a thriving province.
- Healthy Communities - by addressing the factors affecting people's health and well-being, like child poverty, housing, inclusion, and education, we can help improve the quality of life for all Nova Scotians.

I believe the most important thing governments can do is to prepare for the future, ensuring we have the services and infrastructure that the growth we are seeing demands.

Mr. Speaker, in the last year, we have experienced the fastest annual population growth since 1926, almost 100 years ago. Why 1926? Because that's as far back as our economists can track annual data. We are seeing the tightest labour markets since the early 1970s, with unemployment rates falling to as low as 6.5 per cent.

The world is experiencing inflation. Much of this inflation has been created by supply chain interruptions coming out of the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has driven up the price of fossil fuels. And we know that drives up the price of everything else. In July, the federal government will place its carbon tax on fuels, and this will prove to be a drag on the economy.

Our government is offering solutions to help navigate through these times of change and growth, because with growth comes opportunities. Growth can transform our economy. Nova Scotia has felt the effects of the opposite of growth too many times. Let me tell you, I would much rather be dealing with the opportunities that come with growth than the challenges that come with decline.

Growth brings in new investment, new ideas, a new perspective. It opens doors for entrepreneurs who want to start a business and for business owners who want to grow and venture into new markets.

Nova Scotia's economy proved more resilient and recharged more quickly through the pandemic. Today, our exports are up beyond pre-pandemic levels. We have reached record high employment. We are seeing strong recovery in the tourism sector, and housing construction is working at full steam trying to keep up with the demands of a growing population. This has meant increased revenues for the provincial government, giving us capacity to make the significant investments we are making to fix health care.

The budget I'm tabling today is about meeting this moment in time. It will fuel the momentum of the work we've started, investing in solutions that will make life better for Nova Scotians and build a healthier, more thriving province. With \$14.4 billion in spending, we have the ability to empower people and address our province's priorities. Mr. Speaker, health care is at the top of that list.

ACTION FOR HEALTH CARE

The centrepiece of this budget is health care. Budget 2023 is focused on our government's plan to fix health care. The Action for Health plan is our road map to better health care for each and every Nova Scotian.

This budget puts \$6.5 billion into health care. That's \$1.2 billion - or almost 22 per cent - more money than the previous government budgeted just two years ago. These investments are meant to empower the people working in the health system so they feel better equipped to provide quality care to their patients.

These investments are also meant to empower Nova Scotians with new choices and new ways to access their health care better and faster. We are taking an all-hands-on-deck approach, and the Premier and our Ministers of Health are engaging health care leaders, everyone working in the health care system, regulators, service providers, as well as our universities and colleges. We are very pleased they are stepping up to the plate.

In every step we take, we want to see real results for Nova Scotia families: greater access to doctors; more nurses at the bedside; health care providers working to the full scope of their abilities; shorter wait times; better mental health services; ambulances there when you need them; more hospital beds and more long-term care spaces; and emergency departments that work. These are the results Nova Scotians want.

More Health Care Workers

Mr. Speaker, these results are only possible if we have enough people delivering health care. Our plan is about building health care teams with better working conditions, opportunities for mentorship and training, less red tape, modern hospitals and technology, and having the tools they need to provide a high standard of care. This is how we empower our teams and how Nova Scotia becomes a magnet for health providers.

We're opening up more opportunities for people who want to train as a nurse, paramedic, or continuing care assistant with more training spaces, financial incentives, and a direct path to a job. We are also piloting new approaches to recruiting more mental health care providers.

People living in rural Nova Scotia need more doctors, and we've made a nearly \$60 million investment now, so that in a few short years, more family doctors with a focus on rural health will be graduating from a new medical school campus at Cape Breton University. Our hope is that more young Nova Scotians can realize their dream of becoming a doctor here at home.

There are many health care providers who want to come to Nova Scotia. It's getting easier and faster for internationally trained health care workers to get licenced. Our regulatory colleges are finding ways to ensure newly recruited doctors and nurses can start practicing in our communities more quickly.

Mr. Speaker, we are finding solutions to keep our current workforce, too. Earlier this week, our Premier sent a strong message to nurses and other health care workers. That was: We value you and want you to keep working in our province's health care system. That message came with retention incentives that we hope will encourage more nurses and other providers to stay working in Nova Scotia.

Today, I'm happy to announce another solution that will make Nova Scotia even more attractive to nurses. Starting for the 2023 tax year, we will include nurses in the More Opportunity for Skilled Trades provincial tax refund program. Eligible nurses under the age of 30 will receive a refund of the provincial income tax they pay on their first \$50,000 of income.

Faster Access to Care

We need more health care workers, but we also need the system they work in to be effective so that people get faster access to care. People coming to an emergency department are facing great uncertainty. We want them to have confidence in the actions we are taking to improve the care and experience they will receive.

Things that will make a difference like:

- adding more nurse practitioners in emergency departments;
- having patient advocates in all emergency waiting rooms to interact with and keep an eye on people until they can be seen by the health care team; and
- adding a new role - care providers - working in ED waiting rooms.

We're also opening more urgent treatment centres closer to where people live and freeing up trained paramedics by reducing the number of routine patient transfers they do.

One of the biggest challenges in our system continues to be the time people are waiting for surgeries. Our investments this year will support more hospital beds, more technology, and better planning. We are increasing the number of hours operating rooms are working so that people can get the surgeries they need more quickly.

We are using real-time data on bed use to help move people through the system more efficiently, and getting patients moving more quickly after their surgeries, which can help them go home sooner. Of course, we're looking to better support people who are in hospital beds but who should be in long-term care, offering them a more appropriate level of care and opening more hospital beds for people coming out of surgeries.

Travel is a major barrier to people accessing care, which is why we are adding new options to help empower people to get the care they need closer to home through mobile health teams, community pharmacy locations, pharmacist walk-in clinics, more virtual care options, and expanding people's access to same-day-next-day primary care appointments.

Dialysis services are expanding in the Liverpool and Pictou areas, supporting those patients who need it. We are providing a range of improvements to cancer care services, too.

This budget includes 14 new cancer drugs available under our Pharmacare programs. We are also introducing a new early screening program for people at high risk of developing lung cancer and expanding services at community-based cancer care sites, so people can travel less and get more of the services they need in their community.

We need to ensure our health care system understands our diverse communities and their needs to build trust and improve health outcomes. This includes training for health care workers, encouraging young people from underrepresented communities to consider careers in health care, and working with community leaders on other solutions.

Mr. Speaker, our Action for Health plan addresses the needs of people with addictions and mental health concerns. Our ultimate goal is offering universal access to mental health and addictions services. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. That's why we are putting a variety of solutions in place that reflect the different needs of Nova Scotians.

People have access to one-on-one supportive counselling with professionals to help with general mental health concerns over the phone, online, or in-person. We've opened the province's first mental health acute day hospital at the QEII Health Sciences Centre and expect the second one to open this Spring at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital.

People with mental illness in need of intensive treatment can get it at the hospital during the day and return home in the evening. This helps reduce the number of overnight hospital admissions, easing pressures on psychiatric units without compromising the quality of care.

This year, more people struggling with addictions will have better access to care through six new recovery support centres. When there, clients have withdrawal support and can access other levels of care based on their individual needs, such as opioid-use disorder treatment and community mental health and addictions programs.

Seniors and Long-term Care

Too many Nova Scotians are waiting to get into long-term care, and it places incredible stress on families and strain on the entire health system. We are opening more spaces and recruiting more staff. Our government is committed to adding 1,200 new long-term care spaces and renovating 2,300 more by 2027. We're also doing more to improve existing facilities with one-time, \$25 million additional capital funding this year.

Mr. Speaker, this government will explore every opportunity to improve care and give dignity back to our seniors. Nova Scotia is one of the first provinces in Canada to establish a 4.1 standard of care. That means every nursing home resident should receive an average of 4.1 hours of direct care each day from their care providers.

Some homes have already reached this standard, most homes are ready to implement it, and others are preparing now. The key to meeting the standard is finding the people we need to hire. The free education and increased wages for CCAs will help. Recently, we had the 1,000th student sign up for a CCA training program, and we are on track to reach 2,000 CCA students over two years.

Many Nova Scotians want to stay in their homes for as long as possible, and the demand for home support programs is growing. We are increasing budgets for home care and direct funding programs by \$25 million so more people can get the level of care and support they need.

This year, to help keep our seniors healthy, I'm pleased to announce that all Nova Scotians 65 years of age and older will have access to the high-dose flu vaccine for free.

Building More, Faster

Mr. Speaker, when a Nova Scotian steps into one of our hospitals they should feel they are in the best place to receive care. The Capital Plan makes generational investments in health care infrastructure for our growing province. For instance:

- A person who needs surgery will get in more quickly with four more operating rooms and 400 new hospital beds.
- Cancer patients will receive the best advances in treatment in new cancer care centres.
- A stroke survivor will receive their therapy in a new rehabilitation centre.
- A cardiac patient will participate in leading-edge research at a new centre of excellence for heart health.

We are moving on these and many other redevelopment projects across the province.

Beyond the bricks and mortar, modern health care is also about the systems behind the care. One Person One Record will replace or connect more than 80 systems health care providers use to record and view patient information. Many of these systems are outdated, slow, and information cannot be shared easily between them. One Person One Record will allow health care providers at any Nova Scotia Health or IWK Health facility to access a patient's complete, up-to-date information at any time. It will save time, improve care, and give health providers more time with patients.

A HEALTHY ECONOMY

Skilled Workers and Immigration

Mr. Speaker, healthier people are the foundation of a strong economy. The doors of opportunity are open, and Nova Scotians should feel empowered. They have choices. This is a marketplace that favours workers, requiring employers to be more creative and competitive in attracting the talent they need.

All of this highlights the important role of our universities, the Nova Scotia Community College, the Apprenticeship Agency, and Employment Nova Scotia with Nova Scotia Works offices around our province. Helping people with training, skills development, and employment resources to realize new opportunities.

For some, this could mean starting a career with higher pay, benefits, and a path for advancement. We want our young people to know there is a place for them in the skilled trades. This Spring, workers under the age of 30 who work in eligible skilled trades and film and video occupations will receive a rebate of their 2022 provincial income tax paid on the first \$50,000 of income.

This is available through the More Opportunity for Skilled Trades tax refund program that our Premier announced last year as part of our plan to attract and retain people with the skills employers are looking for. This year, we will help connect more people to employers through paid internships, expanding life and job skills for youth at risk, making it easier to become an apprentice faster, and helping employers hire first-year apprentices in Red Seal trades.

Growing our population is part of our plan to grow the economy and fix health care. The newcomers from across Canada and from around the world who we will welcome in the years ahead will help to build homes and provide the health care and child care we all need. They are being hired for hard-to-fill jobs, and in some cases, they are creating jobs with new businesses.

Business and Innovation

This government is growing key sectors and strengthening local business so that we can secure Nova Scotia's place in the economy of the future. Nova Scotia-made products are second to none, produced with passion and skill.

Nova Scotia Loyal will be a fresh, new buy-local program. After doing the research, talking with producers, businesses, and customers, we expect Nova Scotia Loyal will launch this year. Buying local starts with growing local, and this government has been helping farmers and agri-businesses put fresh, healthy, local food on Nova Scotians' tables and into large-scale kitchens in our schools, hospitals, and nursing homes.

Farmers who are investing in their operations have a partner in this government. With recent investments, we are helping to offset the cost of new technologies to increase production, extend the growing season, and open new market opportunities. Wine

producers, who had a very tough Winter this year, will be interested to know that the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy will continue with added support, for a total spend of \$1.1 million.

With the world starting to travel again, major events being hosted here, and a strong interest in our corner of the world is happening once again. We will introduce new tools to promote tourism and offer compelling reasons for people to visit. Visitors are looking for new experiences, which is why we will develop a year-round tourism marketing strategy and why we want to work with our partners to develop new African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw cultural tourism experiences.

The film industry promotes our province as a tourism destination in a unique way, and interest in making films here is growing. This is why we will expand the Film & Television Production Incentive Fund by another \$14 million this year.

We will also invest more in forestry, energy and resource development, and ocean technology. The global marketplace is eager for new sources of renewable energy. This is why we will further explore the potential of our offshore wind resource to produce green hydrogen. It is an example of how we're shifting our focus to a greener, more innovative economy.

Investment in physical capital, such as machinery and equipment, is a key productivity driver. The Innovation Rebate Program and the recently expanded Capital Investment Tax Credit are encouraging more businesses to invest in their operations to become more productive, competitive, efficient, and sustainable.

Nova Scotia businesses are also better able to innovate and grow when they can focus on their business and not on red tape. Last year, initiatives across government helped to achieve about \$10.7 million in estimated savings for business. When time is money, these changes matter to business owners and we expect to see more progress this year.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

A healthy community is one where people are connected - connected to each other and the world around them. Last week, I released the Capital Plan. This plan will come to life in every community.

A main feature of this \$1.6 billion plan is more investment in highways and local roads to support a moving economy and help connect people to each other and to opportunity. Over the past two years, we have added significant funding:

- \$60 million more for local roads, which is an increase of 130 per cent;
- \$35 million more for gravel roads - an increase of 175 per cent or nearly triple compared to two years ago; and

- After we doubled the local road maintenance budget to \$22 million last year, we're doing even more. We've upped the budget by a further \$14 million this year. (Applause)

I'm going to clap for the people back home in Inverness.

Safer roads for everyone, but people need more than roads to stay connected.

Nova Scotians have been waiting for better access to high-speed internet. I'm told the Internet for Nova Scotia Initiative is on track to reach 98,500 homes and businesses by the end of 2023. With the Province's Satellite Rebate Program and other local projects, 99.9 per cent of Nova Scotian homes and businesses will have access to high-speed internet.

This government is also investing in local rinks, art centres, museums, and recreational centres. These are gathering places that bring people together, promote healthy living, and reflect the uniqueness of our communities. We have been pleased to support community organizations with projects to do repairs and energy efficiency upgrades to their facilities, as well as buy generators. This year, we'll add \$2 million more so that more organizations can buy generators - so that when a storm strikes, there is a warm and powered place for community members to go.

We are investing \$7.7 million in our provincial museum sites, arts and culture organizations, and community-owned museums. This will provide a much-needed boost to organizations that have not received an increase in 15 years. The common denominator: the member for Pictou Centre, who was last a member of a government when those budgets were last increased.

We will celebrate and promote Nova Scotia's first language under the Mi'kmaw language legislation which passed last year. A new committee will come together this year to develop a multi-year strategy to reclaim, preserve, and revitalize the language.

We strive to work with Nova Scotians to help them find success in their communities. Some of our most vulnerable family members and neighbours benefit from specialized, targeted support that meets their needs and helps them lead more independent lives.

We are doing more. This year, we will provide:

- \$28.4 million more for a range of Disability Support Programs;
- \$7.8 million more for prevention and early intervention programs;
- \$6.2 million more to continue to redesign the foster care system;

- \$4.4 million more to support more people transitioning from residential centres into community-based options.

We will also increase funding for initiatives that help to keep women and their children safe. The Standing Together Action Plan to Prevent Domestic Violence and coordinated efforts to prevent human trafficking and sexual exploitation will continue with our support this year.

Housing, Homelessness & Affordability

Mr. Speaker, we have been providing targeted supports to help Nova Scotians with the cost of living: reducing the cost of child care; more affordable housing options; programs that help people lower their energy bills; access to health care and good food; and helping young people repay student loans.

This year, the \$500 Seniors Care Grant to help seniors with household needs continues. I'm pleased to say there will be no fee increases for the Seniors Pharmacare and Family Pharmacare programs.

We're investing in our children and youth to help break the cycle of poverty. We are once again increasing the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. In the last two years, we have increased the benefit by \$600 - from \$925 to \$1,525 - for those at the lowest income levels. This year's \$8 million increase will benefit more than 40,000 children.

We are also committed to helping young people from low-income families build connections to communities, build self-confidence, and develop a career path so they may live full and prosperous lives. They will be supported through a range of programs to meet their needs, whether they be social, mental health, or finding employment. They have access to skills upgrading, training, education, and job opportunities to achieve independence.

Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotians need more housing. For the past 18 months, we have started to implement solutions to reduce barriers, speed up development, attract the workforce, and get more people and families into safe and affordable housing faster. It takes real co-operation from all levels of government, involvement of the private and not-for-profit sectors and communities, and more money for more projects and new ideas. We have a task force in place to find ways to accelerate housing development of all types within the Halifax region.

With the success of our universities and college system, post-secondary students need more options too, so they can study more and not worry about where they're going to live. Three student housing projects are now under construction at three NSCC campuses, two in Dartmouth and one in Pictou County. This year, we expect to see more solutions in a Student Housing Strategy from the Minister of Advanced Education.

We have established the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency and invested well over \$200 million. We've supported rapid housing projects, below-market rent projects, modular housing for health care and skilled trades workers, and rent supplements. This year, this work continues. This budget will support further private sector- and community-led development and reduce wait-lists for much-needed housing programs.

More people who need help with their rent will get it this year. With an added investment of \$21.6 million, we can support more than 1,000 new rent supplements. This brings the total to more than 8,000, compared with less than 5,000 when this government took office in 2021.

For people who qualify for home repair and adaptation programs - many of whom are seniors - we are eliminating the wait-list. The additional \$13 million will help about 800 more homeowners, for a total of 2,800 households that can receive assistance this year. This is the second year in a row government is increasing funding for low-income homeowners.

Through our Capital Plan, we're adding \$15.3 million more for public housing upgrades and repairs, for a total of \$21 million. A new provincial housing strategy is coming this Spring, which will set the direction for what's to come next.

Our government is also committed to working on solutions for those who are experiencing homelessness. Recently, the Overlook opened its doors to offer permanent supportive housing units to 60 people who are chronically unhoused. With \$8.2 million more this year, we will ensure people have access to overnight shelter, emergency and supportive housing options, and outreach workers who can help connect them to important services.

Education

We want the best possible start in life for all of our children. Parents want child care that is affordable and available where they live and when they work. To meet these needs, our government is transforming child care in Nova Scotia, with the support of the federal government.

We are reducing fees to make licensed child care more affordable. With the changes introduced last year, families should be paying less today than they did one year ago. We'll continue to see fees lowered to an average of \$10 a day in 2026.

We know it's tough for many families looking for available spaces, so we are working with the sector to open 1,500 more child care spaces in centres and family homes across the province. This expansion takes time, but we are pleased many new family homes have opened - spaces in Oxford, Hubbards, Windsor, Lower Sackville, and Lower

Onslow. Hundreds more are coming by the end of this year. We've also heard from parents and added more than 700 before- and after-school care spaces in schools, with more to come.

Recruiting and retaining this workforce is vital. We started increasing wages for child care workers last year. This year, we will spend an additional \$40 million in provincial funds to keep our commitment to continue to increase wages and benefits. We have been helping child care operators with workforce initiatives, inflationary cost pressures and more funding for infant spaces, which are in demand. These and the other steps that we are taking will help ensure children have access to high-quality, affordable, flexible, and inclusive early learning and child care across Nova Scotia.

Mr. Speaker, with about 129,000 students from pre-Primary to Grade 12 in the public school system this year, our government understands the importance of investing in a strong education as part of a healthy province. This year, we will advance nearly \$50 million more to our public schools to address growing enrolment, more teachers, and other inflationary pressures.

Working with teachers and administrators, we are putting a strong focus on improving the learning environment, student achievement, and health and well-being in our schools. This year, we will:

- enhance access to mental health supports in our schools, including more counsellors, online resources, and training;
- improve approaches to teaching mathematics, reading, and writing;
- continue to ensure ongoing support for inclusive education;
- update the Special Education Policy and invest in assistive technology supports in classrooms;
- update the School Food and Nutrition policy and launch a new physical activity framework;
- expand opportunities for junior high and high school students to learn about opportunities in the skilled trades;
- expand support for new Canadian students.

We continue to invest in technology to support learning. This year, we are providing \$6 million more to refresh classroom technology.

Environment

Nova Scotia has long been recognized as a leader in setting ambitious environmental goals and taking actions to achieve them. We introduced the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act in Fall 2021 with 28 goals that now serve as our road map. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting land, improving access to renewable energy sources, and advancing climate change adaptation programming are just some things under way.

With funding options available, people are empowered to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, businesses, and community buildings and cut the cost of their power bills.

This year, with a new investment of \$41 million, we will work with communities and partners to make progress on the new Nova Scotia Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth. We will do all that we can to make sure Nova Scotia and Nova Scotians can prepare for the changing climate and seize the opportunities that a green economy can offer as part of a clean, healthy, and sustainable province.

CONCLUSION

As I mark the end of this budget address, I would like to acknowledge the many people at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board and across government who have helped develop this budget, and to everyone throughout the public service who will provide Nova Scotians with the services they will receive over the coming year. They care and they want the best for their communities.

I also want to acknowledge my colleagues on both sides of this Legislature. Important questions will be asked on behalf of Nova Scotians during the Budget Estimates debate. In particular, I want to thank members of the PC caucus, without whom this budget tabled today would not be possible: their belief in something better, the ideas they have brought to the table, and their hope for the future.

I thank our Premier for his leadership in setting the direction of this administration, and moving quickly on the opportunities and challenges that have faced our province.

There have been a lot of long nights away from home. Willow, Ivy and Lochlann are watching from home with Lucie today. I want to wish them well and I want to thank their brothers, Owen and Ben, for being such a good help around the house.

Three weeks after being sworn in as a new government just 18 months ago, we took control of the previous government's budget and started to shape it around what we believed were the priorities of Nova Scotians. We set our province on a new course, because our province is growing, and we need to invest today to ensure we have the

services and infrastructure that the growth we are seeing demands. That growth has led to significantly more revenues than were projected by independent experts. All of the increased investments we are making in health care and other areas are manageable and within our growing fiscal and economic capacity. We continue to manage our fiscal health while investing in priorities of Nova Scotians.

Budget 2023-24 will empower Nova Scotians, for it is our people whom we can all trust to move our province forward - our health care system, our economy, and our communities.

Thank you.

[1:45 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: I am happy to stand today to begin the reply to the budget. I would like to thank the honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board for delivering the budget today. We've had a brief chance to look at this document this morning.

This government continues to govern by way of sound bite and the title of this document is just that: *More Healthcare, Faster*. (Interruptions)

THE SPEAKER: Order please, the honourable member for Northside-Westmount has the floor.

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the members on the other side that we just sat through 40 minutes of a Budget Address without a peep. It's now our turn to have the floor to speak about this budget and I would expect the same back from the other side, so I will begin again.

The title of this document is *More Healthcare, Faster*. I would describe it as more debt quicker. Under this budget, Mr. Speaker, the provincial debt will grow by one-third, from \$16.6 billion upon taking office, to \$22.2 billion at the end of this mandate. It is scheduled to grow even more in their estimate for the final year that is in this forecast.

What does that mean? It means that we are growing the debt with significantly increasing deficits. Over the remaining term of this government, they will increase the debt through deficit of \$1.6 billion, which will include a whopping \$610 million deficit in the final year of their mandate.

Mr. Speaker, if we look at the total \$1.6 billion in deficit, this equates to \$1,542 in debt per Nova Scotian over three years. If we look at the accumulated debt, which includes deficit and capital, we're looking at an increase in the province's debt of \$5.6 billion, which equates to \$5,400 per Nova Scotian.

Mr. Speaker, we all understand that we need to spend money. We all understand that we have to make sure that the business of government operates. However, to put this province into this position in four simple years brings us back to the time of the 1980s: spending, spending, spending, with no plan, with no direction, just throwing money at the wall to see what sticks. Because of the growth in this soaring debt, the cost to service that debt, or the interest costs - and Nova Scotians understand that if you have a loan you pay interest - the interest costs, or the debt servicing costs, will grow significantly. In the final year of this mandate, the cost just simply to maintain this debt is \$159 million more than it was in Year 2. That is significant - a significant growth in debt servicing costs.

I'm worried about the future of this province, and everyone in this room should also be, as I'm sure Nova Scotians are.

When we look at this budget, there's nothing in this budget for Nova Scotians who are struggling - no new housing developments; no increases in social assistance for those who are most vulnerable. All the while, Nova Scotians see their spending power go down due to the rising cost of inflation. We all know that Nova Scotia is still well above the national average in inflation.

At the end of the day, there's only one way to pay for - there are two ways to pay for this spending, and it will be interesting to see what future governments are going to have to do to make up for this. Will they have to raise taxes? Will they have to cut programs? Something is going to have to give.

We see in this budget a huge increase in provincial income taxes. The government will tell you that it's due to immigration, it's due to more people coming in, and it's due to more people making money. But it's also due to the fact that we have a hidden tax expense here in Nova Scotia in the bracket creep, so as spending power goes down, your income comes up - well, you don't get the full amount of that income that you should get, because it's going to income taxes.

Where is the relief for young families, young families who right now can't afford to purchase a home? They can't afford the rent. If you look at the average rent in Nova Scotia, especially here in HRM, it's out of reach for many people.

We see an increase of 1,000 rent supplements per year, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know what? On the surface, that's a great sound bite, looks great. There are no properties to rent. There are no properties for people to find.

We also need to take a look at our housing income limits in this province. We need to raise those limits so that more people qualify for the programs that we have available to them to stay in their homes for seniors.

Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotia has the highest income taxes in Atlantic Canada. We talked about this yesterday. As a matter of fact, we're probably the highest, or close to the highest, in Canada and in North America. As we continue to pay more income taxes, our debts grow. The debt for this province is continuing to grow. And when we look - Mr. Speaker, an alarming figure from this budget today is the debt-to-GDP ratio. Under the previous government, this was held to around 32 per cent. Based on the net deficit spending that we're seeing from this government and their forecast for the future, that is going to bring us up close to the previous NDP government. No offence to my NDP colleagues, but we're approaching that 37 per cent of GDP-to-debt ratio. (Laughter) It's stuck in my brain now.

I think we have the best NDP Premier we've ever had right now currently in spending. Maybe not the best.

As we continue to see these levels climb, we've just seen most recently the government announce the removal of rent caps to 5 per cent. People can't afford rent as it is today. We're now going to move this to 5 per cent. Their own projections for inflation are less than 5 per cent so my question is: Where did we come up with this 5 per cent number? How are Nova Scotians going to afford to pay that rent going forward?

I'd like to remind people about last year's budget. You will recall that in last year's budget, we had a surprise surplus of around \$350 million that we didn't know was going to happen. Mr. Speaker, the government made sure this year that we weren't going to have a surprise surplus when, in the month of March, they doled out hundreds of millions of dollars in spending clearly at the last minute and without any thought, as we saw from the recent nursing bonus - all the individuals who were left out of this program. Spending money for the sake of spending money when we could have ended up with a surplus in this province.

I am truly worried about the future of this province and so should everyone in Nova Scotia be worried about this. I will have more to say about the budget tomorrow when I have had more time to go through the documents. At this time, I'd like to move to adjourn debate on the Budget Address. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate on the Budget Address. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We have a few introductions that have been requested before beginning the daily routine and I will give my Speaker's Ruling from yesterday before we begin.

The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw everyone's attention to your Speaker's Gallery. We have a man who was a member of this Chamber as an MLA. Murray Ryan, would you please stand and accept the applause of the House. (Applause)

[2:00 p.m.]

Mr. Speaker, just a quick word. I'd like to thank Murray. He played a big part as finance critic for our party. He was also a big part of developing a platform and an anchor for our financial analysis of many of our initiatives.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I'd like to bring the House's attention to the West Gallery.

First, I'd like to introduce Maria Nehema, who is working in our caucus office. Maria is a student from Charles P. Allen High School in Bedford. She's a Grade 12 student who's been working in our caucus through the co-op program as well as in the constituency office of the member for Bedford South.

Maria is a bright student with a passion for politics and community service. It has been a real pleasure to have her working for us. I want to take this moment to thank her for her work in this House on the record and recognize her support to our team and, of course, to the students in her school and the broader community, as well. (Applause)

I'd also like to introduce the infamous John Grant, who's here with us today. He's the creator of Urban Halifax which has over 70,000 followers online. John has recently worked to establish a podcast as well. He has a very exciting and growing social media network and business. John, thanks for being here as well. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank.

HON. BRIAN WONG: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Permission granted.

BRIAN WONG: In the gallery today, we have four students from Johns Hopkins University who are representing 19 folks from Johns Hopkins University and are here in Nova Scotia for the week, doing work for the Department of Advanced Education. I would like to introduce Daniel Duchaine, Emily Tatum, Garrett Richards, and T.J. Worthington. They are here doing work on behalf of the Department of Advanced Education based on networking that the Premier did while in Washington, D.C., last Fall. They're here working on two things for us: transition supports from high school to post-secondary education and

accelerated degree programs. They have fanned out all over Nova Scotia doing their interviews and their research. Please give them a very big Nova Scotia welcome. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Indeed, we welcome all visitors to the Legislature today. We hope you enjoyed the presentation of the budget and hope you'll stay around for the fireworks in Question Period. Please enjoy your stay.

Before we begin with the daily routine, I would like to rule on the request on a point of order yesterday. After ruling on a point of order following Question Period yesterday, the honourable Leader of the Official Opposition rose to seek clarification on whether the language used by the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care in an exchange with the member for Northside-Westmount was unparliamentary. To quote the minister from Hansard, her statement in response to the member for Northside-Westmount was, quote: "Mr. Speaker, that's the most sexist and inappropriate statement I've ever heard made in this Legislature."

I must assume that it's the use of the word "sexist" by the minister that has concerned the honourable Leader of the Official Opposition. As everyone in this House should recall, it is always unparliamentary to impute motives of another member or to use personal attacks, insults, or obscenities.

You will further recall that whether any given remark is unparliamentary depends not only on the content of the word spoken but also the surrounding context, as well as the tone inflicted. Alleging that a member is sexist can certainly be unparliamentary. However, examining the surrounding context of the exchange, it appears obvious to me in these circumstances, the minister was expressing her perception of the member's remarks. She did not state that the member for Northside-Westmount was sexist.

Whether a member's perception is correct is not a matter for the Speaker to decide. That would send a dangerous precedent and is something I have been careful to avoid in the past. Admittedly, this can become a full line to tread, but in ruling yesterday that no point of order existed, I have already determined that the specific exchange in question did not rise to the level of unparliamentary language.

That being said, yesterday's exchange between the member for Northside-Westmount and the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care did cause a disruption in the House. The fact that the honourable Leader of the Official Opposition felt compelled to request my clarification, combined with the negative reaction of the House by members on all sides during the exchange, leads me to conclude that this House expects a higher level of decorum. That threshold was not met during yesterday's exchange.

Therefore, I will uphold my ruling, and I'll use this opportunity to once again invite everyone to approach today and every day in a spirit of good faith, mutual respect, dignity,

and courtesy. We're only on Day 3, folks. Let's do our best to keep the level of civility in our debates at a healthy level as we carry out our most important work on behalf of all Nova Scotians.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to table, pursuant to Section 27(5) of the Finance Act, the Order in Council 2023-80 dated March 21, 2023, detailing the additional appropriations included in the final forecast for the fiscal year 2022-2023. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 272 - An Act to Amend Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2010, the Finance Act.
(Lisa Lachance)

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that this bill be read a second time on a future day.

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg.

JARVIS, DAVID: WE FEED LUNENBURG CREATION - CONGRATS.

HON. SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I rise today to bring recognition to David Jarvis, a 22-year veteran of the British armed forces, who has found a new mission in fighting food poverty. It began when David retired to Lunenburg County and planted a vegetable garden. Realizing his modest plot could produce far more produce than he and his household needed, David began donating it to the local food bank - but he didn't stop

there. He realized if he could do this, there had to be others who might donate their excess. So David established the group We Feed Lunenburg.

In the Summer months, We Feed Lunenburg coordinates deliveries of surplus garden produce, while in the Winter months, David, a trained baker, encourages the We Feed Lunenburg community to contribute fresh, home-baked goods. He even offers recipes designed to produce that extra loaf of bread via the We Feed Lunenburg YouTube channel.

Mr. Speaker, please join me in congratulating David Jarvis and We Feed Lunenburg.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

DAUGHTER, EMILY: MEMBER IS PROUD OF HER - RECOG.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I'm making one up on the fly. (Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, I rise in my place today because I did a member statement for my daughter Allie the last time and my other daughter, Emily, asked me if dad could do a member statement for her. So, I rise in my place to talk about my little girl Emily, who is in school today, but she'll watch this when she gets home. I rise in my place to tell her how proud I am of her. She is a great big sister to Allie. She loves geography, she loves the planet, she loves drawing flags, and she has a heart of gold like her mother.

So, to Emily - I hope you see this tonight. I hope your mother sees what I said about her too but I do - hey, as I said before, we all leave from home to come here. We have the honour of doing this job and holding these positions but when we do that many of us, leave home, as many Nova Scotians have to do, but we leave home too, and leave our families at home.

To Emily - Dad is proud of you, you are a big sister and, depending on the weather, I might see you tomorrow or Saturday. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: That certainly is covering all your bases for sure. (Laughter)

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

INCOME ASSISTANCE: NEED TO INCREASE - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: Since the last session of this House, Mr. Speaker, a budget statement has been issued in the U.K. which is of relevance to us. A U.K. statement announced a 10.1 per cent increase in the benefits which are the equivalent of income assistance benefits in Nova Scotia.

Like the situation in Nova Scotia, the real value of benefits in the U.K. has been declining for several years, with the impact of inflation. The 2023 benefits increase reflects the U.K. government's effort to increase benefits at a level parallel with inflation. It is also worth noting that the U.K. has announced cost of living payments equal to approximately \$1,500 a year for those receiving those benefits. It is intensely regrettable that this government has not been equally progressive. (Applause)

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton East.

MACDONALD, JOHNNIE: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. BRIAN COMER: Mr. Speaker, I rise today in memory of Johnnie MacDonald of Louisbourg, who passed away on March the 3rd.

Johnnie was born and raised in the town of Louisbourg, where he raised his family and was a dedicated volunteer in the community. From coaching baseball, mentoring local kids or hockey with Louisbourg Old Buoys, he was always available for those who needed him the most.

His professional life developed 50 years as a bricklayer - a very physically demanding job which he enjoyed very much, always saying, if you're going to do a job, you might as well do it right.

Johnnie left behind his wife and soulmate, Linda, several siblings, two sons, and three grandchildren, who were his pride and joy. I stand here today to extend my deepest condolences to Johnnie's family and his commitment for the community.

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

DUPUIS, LUC: CANADA WINTER GAMES PARTIC. - RECOG.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I rise today to recognize Luc Dupuis of Beechville. Luc was introduced to skating by his mother, a skating coach, at a very early age. He began his skating career in the Canskate program from the age of five and was pairs skating by the age of 12. Now at the age of 16, Luc was selected to represent Team Nova Scotia in the Pre Novice Pairs figure skating at the 2023 Canada Games in P.E.I.

From mid-February to early March, over 3,000 athletes from across Canada were welcomed to P.E.I. to celebrate the very best in sport. Outside of the obvious benefits of learning and practicing new skills, youth sports has been instrumental in keeping participants active, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, teaching teamwork, focusing on discipline and providing opportunities for socialization and leadership.

I'd like the members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Luc for his discipline and hard work to compete on this national stage.

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

MANTLEY, LINDA: AFRICVILLE COMMEMORATION - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize a phenomenal woman in our community of Halifax Needham, Ms. Linda Mantley. Linda Mantley is deeply rooted in Africville. She tells folks all the time that Africville was an independent community that functioned without the help of the city.

Africville had its own school, a hall, a number of stores, and a post office. Linda Mantley's continued passion and work to keep the spirit of Africville alive through education and speaking to our community at large and around the world after the atrocities of the displacement of the Africville peoples is a testament to her dedication to her community. This year celebrates the 40th year of the Africville Reunion, and year after year, Linda helps to organize this big event.

I would like to thank Mrs. Mantley for all her efforts to keep Africville alive, and I'd like to encourage all members to join me and Mrs. Linda Mantley at the 40th Africville Reunion on the Africville grounds this summer.

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg West.

WICKS, BARBARA: SCOUTS CAN. VOL. WORK - THANKS

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I rise today to recognize Barbara Wicks of Bridgewater, who for 50 years has been a dedicated and passionate Scouts Canada volunteer.

Barbara has been involved with Scouts Canada as a Beaver and Cub Scout leader and trainer since 1969 and continued to play an active role as a leader, guiding children ages five to eight, until 2020, when COVID-19 struck. She has also volunteered at many national jamborees and served on the district staff.

In 2014, Barbara received the Award of Fortitude from Scouts Canada, which is awarded to Scouts Canada volunteers, who despite physical or mental impediments to their involvement have made a significant contribution to the organization. Barbara, a fierce cancer survivor, pushed through one of life's greatest challenges and continued her volunteering efforts. She's always ready and willing to serve, accompanied by her trusty walker.

Without a doubt, Barbara has positively impacted the lives of many young people and continues to be an outstanding role model for our community. I call on members of the House of Assembly to join me in thanking Barbara Wicks for her outstanding service.

[2:15 p.m.]

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

MEGAN, CASSIDY: EPILEPSY AWARENESS WORK - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I would like to take this time to recognize that March is Epilepsy Awareness Month. Epilepsy is a neurological disorder that affects people of all ages, and is characterized by the tendency of having recurrent seizures. It affects 50 million people globally.

Despite there being millions affected, a gap remains in the education and awareness of epilepsy. In 2008, a Nova Scotian with epilepsy named Cassidy Megan decided she wanted to make an impact on epilepsy awareness and education. At only eight years old, she started Purple Day here. Purple Day began as a movement in her school to build inclusivity, and has grown into an international campaign helping people of all ages with epilepsy feel heard.

Education is critical in helping those affected by epilepsy, and awareness is a key component to that. I'd like to ask everyone to join me in celebrating Cassidy Megan and the amazing work she's done for epilepsy and the epilepsy community here in this province and beyond. As well, I'd also like to remind this House that this Sunday, March 26th, is Purple Day and I encourage everyone to wear purple and support the remarkable work done by Cassidy and her family, friends, and all the volunteers who help her.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

CRICHTON PARK: FOOD DONATIONS - THANKS

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, Crichton Park in Dartmouth North is a generous community, a fact that has been on full display during the last three annual 12 Days of Giving organized by resident Natasha Beuree-Edwards. Natasha started the 12 Days of Giving food drive in November 2020 to address food insecurity in the early days of the pandemic. That first year, the drive garnered just under 2,000 donated items. The success continued into December 2021 and 2022, with people donating between a 1,000 and 2,000 food items each of those years.

A play on the 12 Days of Christmas, Natasha shared a suggested food item for her neighbours to donate for 12 days, and at the end, everything was collected and delivered to Christ Church Food Bank, where the food items were used in the Christmas hamper

program. I ask the house to join me in thanking Natasha and the residents of Crichton Park for their generosity and their effort to address food insecurity in Dartmouth.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

MUNDLE, WILLIAM: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Mr. Speaker, today I rise to recognize the late William Mundle of Pugwash, who recently passed away following a lengthy illness. Bill was a proud native of Pugwash and a graduate of Mount Allison University with a geology degree. Bill owned and operated Logan Drilling Company for many years and grew it into an international company with subsidiaries in U.S.A. and Colombia. He was involved with both the Mining Society and the Mining Association of Nova Scotia. His work led him to a friendship with the Oak Island treasure hunter Fred Nolan. For many years, Logan Drilling provided drill equipment to those seeking that famous Nova Scotia treasure.

Bill was an avid sailor, even participating in the Marblehead to Halifax race, and was the first commodore of the Pugwash Yacht Club. He volunteered with many local groups, including the Gathering of the Clans, and Harbourfest, and served on the steering committee for the Pugwash waterfront. He had a keen interest in politics, and I always valued our time together. I ask my colleagues to please join me in extending my sympathy to Bill Mundle's family.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants East.

HANTS EAST TIGERS: SILVER MEDAL WIN - CONGRATS.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'd like to bring special recognition to the Hants East Rural High School Tigers female hockey team, who competed in the School Sport Nova Scotia Division 2 hockey provincials in Clare this year. The team swept through the competition taking them to the championship, where they fought hard but fell short to Dalbrae. The Tigers took home a silver medal in SSNS Division 2 of hockey provincials. Mr. Speaker, I would ask all members to join me to congratulate the HERH Tigers female hockey team on their silver medal. They had a great season. I'm looking forward to seeing their accomplishments next season.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

ORGANIZERS: N.S. SCHOLASTIC CHESS CHALLENGE - CONGRATS.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I would just like to mention that on the weekend, I had the pleasure of attending the Nova Scotia Scholastic Chess Challenge, which is put on by the Nova Scotia Scholastic Chess Association, and so we had students from across the

province in grades 1 to 12 who were competing for the right to represent the province at the championships in Montreal coming up later this year.

It was a delight to watch everyone from the very youngest to the oldest engaged in such intense activities and very smart children. It was also a very diverse crowd, I have to say, and I was delighted to see how many parents were there waiting patiently outside, and I just wanted to congratulate the association for putting on this particular event. They do so without much in the way of government funding. I think they have a grant that my colleague helped them get, but I would like to congratulate them on a very successful event.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

O'FLAHERTY, KEITH: LYME DIS. DIAGNOSIS EFFORTS - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: A friend of mine, Keith O'Flaherty, has Lyme disease. Three years ago, he began experiencing severe health issues. Despite the number of tests, blood tests, doctors' visits from Sydney to Halifax, numerous ER trips, and the process of elimination, no one thought to test for Lyme disease. After two years, and self-advocacy, Keith was diagnosed.

He has been working hard to promote early detection, because this disease can masquerade - the symptoms, Mr. Speaker, are linked to other illnesses. The diagnosis delay can be devastating and have significant health consequences for people like Keith. He is a 33-year provincial government employee with the Departments of Community Services and Education. Due to his health issues, Keith has had to take lots of time off over the past three years.

Keith still suffers the health effects of the diagnosis two years after a diagnosis and treatment. Mr. Speaker, more education on ticks and access to health care, testing, and Lyme disease specialists are needed in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland South.

U-18 RAMS HOCKEY TEAM: GREAT SEASON - RECOG.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, as the minor hockey season winds down I want to pay special tribute to the team I coach, and that is the U-18 Rams. I want to give a special shout-out to a few players: Nate, Lucas, Zach, Charles, Cohen, Karter, Aiden, Braxton, Jlynn, Mandel, Dru, Connor, Mackenzie, Bayley, Ben, Landon, Grayson. It has been a pleasure to coach every one of you this season.

It's been a great season. Two of our players are moving on. This is their last season in minor hockey, so a special shout-out to Nate and Aiden. It has been a wonderful time coaching you over the last number of years. It has been a pleasure to coach with Mitch,

Phill, and Jacob, and our manager, Jen. A special shout-out to them tonight. Good luck. We're in the semi-finals of our league tonight.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

PARAMEDICS: NEED FOR SUPPORT - RECOG.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Today's budget is called More Healthcare, Faster. Well, Mr. Speaker, there was nothing in this budget or no mention of paramedics. Paramedics are on the front line of our health care. They are stretched thin, exhausted, underpaid, and undervalued.

I was hoping there would be support and some understanding for our brave health care heroes. Know that we will continue to fight for you, that you are loved and respected until the end of time. Thank you for all you and, most important, stay safe.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

RAMADAN: MUSLIM CELEBRATION - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to mark an important period for thousands of Nova Scotians. Ramadan is observed by the Muslim community worldwide as an occasion to pray, reflect, and contribute to one's community. Between the two sightings of the crescent moon of the ninth month, many will abstain from eating, drinking or other activities from dawn until dusk. Many will simultaneously devote extra time to charity or volunteer work. Families and friends will bond over these acts of generosity, as well as sahur and iftar, the pre- and post-fast daily meals.

I ask that my colleagues in this House join me in marking the beginning of Ramadan and in wishing our province's Muslim community a month of meaningful reflection, connection, and work to make the world a better place. Ramadan Mubarak.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

DILL, BOBBY: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Mr. Speaker, a life was lost in January that impacted almost our entire community. Cousin Bobby Dill was what you would call a local hockey legend and you would be hard-pressed to find someone who does not recognize his name.

Bobby was passionate about hockey from an early age. He played minor hockey as a boy and attended Kings College School, playing alongside my dad throughout that time.

He continued playing after graduation and wore numerous jerseys over the years, but none so proudly as when he wore the ones from his hometown.

Bobby was inducted into the Windsor Hockey Heritage Society Hall of Fame as a player in 2003, but he wasn't just a player. He was a coach, a board member, active in fundraising, a mentor to many. He would help anyone, anytime, but most importantly, he was always quick to brighten anyone's mood with his wit and friendly demeanor.

Bobby was a local celebrity, a family man and a friend, and happy hour will not be the same without him.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Armdale.

RAMADAN: MUSLIM CELEBRATION - RECOG.

ALI DUALE: Mr. Speaker, I missed yesterday for my member's statement to have a guest here and I was doing my best on behalf of this House to welcome those guests, so here's my member's statement today.

Today is the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan. Muslims around the world and here at home are observing the fasting from sunrise to sunset, 30 days.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to celebrate the members of our community and to say Ramadan Mubarak.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

INCOME ASSISTANCE: ONT. INCREASE - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, it is worth taking note today of an important change that was introduced in the Fall 2022 economic statement in Ontario. With that statement the Ontario government dramatically increased the amount of money people with disabilities receiving provincial benefits can earn without having those earnings deducted from their assistance. Prior to these changes, people in this situation in Ontario could receive a maximum of \$200 a month in exempt earnings. Persons with disabilities in Ontario now can earn \$1,000 per month without deductions.

In Nova Scotia, by comparison, a person receiving disability support is able to earn a maximum of \$350 a month without it affecting their benefits. It is intensely disappointing that this government has provided no evidence today of being on such a path.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Glace Bay-Dominion.

WARREN, RICH: HOCKEY TOURN. FOUNDER - THANKS

JOHN WHITE: Mr. Speaker, today the Vince Ryan Memorial Tournament begins, marking its 32nd anniversary. This tournament, which runs until the 26th, is one of the largest recreational adult hockey tournaments in the world.

Every year more than 160 teams from across Canada and the United States gather, bringing thousands of players to rinks across the CBRM. More than 200 volunteers devote thousands of hours to make sure each and every participant enjoys their time in Cape Breton. The combination of hockey and hospitality are what makes this tournament so popular.

Annually the tournament brings to Cape Breton's economy an estimated \$5.1 million during the off-season of tourism. The proceeds of the tournament have awarded more than \$1 million to local high school students.

The Vince Ryan Memorial Hockey Tournament is like no other tournament on beautiful Cape Breton Island. I want to thank and congratulate Rich Warren, the founder and organizer of this amazing tournament. I also want to welcome all players to Cape Breton Island, and I wish them a safe and fun-filled tournament.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

WIFE, ELIZABETH - BIRTHDAY WISHES

HON. BEN JESSOME: Mr. Speaker, I'd just like to take a quick opportunity to wish my beautiful wife a happy birthday today. (Applause)

We moved to Nova Scotia seven or eight years ago and she's been putting up with me ever since. To my wonderful wife, Elizabeth, happy birthday. I would be remiss if I did not also wish her twin sister Daisy a happy birthday as well.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

HILES, JOHN: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize a young person in our community who is always giving back, whether it's positive encouragement or even a hug or a smile: John Hiles, aka Johnny Blue, as the kids would call him.

I have known John for all his life and have watched him grow up into the young man that he is today: successfully finishing school, volunteering in community, helping seniors and youth, coaching basketball at the Community Y, and just being available to support his friends with all of their endeavours.

He is now currently a support worker in the schools encouraging young people to make great choices, helping with emotional distress, and calming kids and staff with his loving nature, which I know he gets from his mom genuinely.

I am so proud of you, Johnny, and I would like to ask all members of this House to join me in recognizing such an amazing young person in Halifax Needham.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Shore.

KENT, HANNAH: LACROSSE ACHIEVEMENTS - RECOG.

KENT SMITH: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to bring recognition to 19-year-old Musquodoboit Harbour resident Hannah Kent, who is the first Nova Scotian to play NCAA women's lacrosse at the D1 level.

Hannah plays for Niagara University and has attended school in the United States since she was 13. She grew up playing indoor lacrosse and hockey. Her love for the sport has resulted in Hannah starting her own business called 902LAX to teach lacrosse skills to young local athletes.

Hannah was recognized for her unique skill set, which was enhanced by her experience playing ice and field hockey, giving her a distinct competitive edge.

I ask all members of this Assembly to join me today in congratulating Hannah for her remarkable achievements in sport and her national recognition in the sport of lacrosse.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

GIANNOULIS, STEPHANIE: HOTEL SERVS. - CONGRATS.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Stephanie Giannoulis and everyone at Halifax Tower Hotel and Conference Centre for their spectacular venue.

I recently had the pleasure of hosting my Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal ceremony at this beautiful hotel and I must say it did not disappoint. The entire venue and services were outstanding. I must mention the gorgeous marblework all throughout this beautiful hotel. If you have not visited it, please go see it.

This new property is perfect for leisure or business trips, as well as corporate events. It has four meeting spaces, a 180-seat restaurant called Le Rouge, and an imperial ballroom. The hotel features an indoor pool, hot tub, fitness centre, games room, and electric vehicle charging stations. The best part is that it is right in my constituency of Clayton Park West.

Congratulations, Stephanie and the Giannoulis family. It's about time that Halifax had a luxuriously spectacular hotel outside of the downtown area.

[2:30 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

2SLGBTQIA+ COM.: NEED FOR PROT. - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I rise to draw attention to the spate of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ laws that are being put forth and passed in countries around the world.

In the U.S., there are a frightening variety of laws targeting trans people and drag performers. Uganda has just passed legislation criminalizing identifying as LGBTQ+. Russia has banned sharing information on LGBTQ+ identities. These are just a few examples.

It's important, though, that we in Atlantic Canada not think we are beyond this kind of discrimination - there is hate here too. Most recently, organizers of the Little Rainbow event in support of rainbow refugees were the target of online hate, and a Moncton drag story time garnered protests.

I call on this House today to recommit to passing and strengthening laws that will protect, serve, support, and empower 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and communities in this province. 2SLGBTQIA+ rights are human rights.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank.

DEVEAU, DANIELLE: RETIREMENT - CONGRATS.

HON. BRIAN WONG: Mr. Speaker, I would like to recognize my recently retired constituency assistant Danielle Deveau, who is currently in Florida for the last two months. Danielle lives in Fall River, where she raised her three children, all of whom graduated from Lockview High School. She has worked for the residents of our communities for more than eight years.

Danielle started working as the constituency assistant to my predecessor, Bill Horne. I was fortunate to have her assistance in my first year and a half as the MLA for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank - because as we all know, it's all about building relationships and trust with constituents.

Danielle has not only assisted those who sought assistance through our office, but she is a great volunteer in the community. A few of her volunteer efforts include assisting

with the annual LWF Golf Tournament for many years, and she has been a lunchtime volunteer at the local schools. Her contributions do not go unnoticed.

Please join me in thanking Danielle and congratulating her on her well-deserved retirement.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

MOTHER, DONNA & FATHER: BIRTHDAY WISHES

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, I would like to wish a happy birthday to two very special people in my life. My mother, Donna, turned 79 last week, and my dad will turn 79 in May. We won't be here then, probably, but I want to get it in there. I owe these two people a lot over my lifetime. I want to wish them a very happy birthday - and I'll see you on the weekend.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

DOUCETTE, ERIN: RESCUE FROM CAR FIRE - RECOG.

KENDRA COOMBES: Heroes are often ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Erin Doucette is one of these people. In December, Erin encountered a motor vehicle accident on Union Highway, River Ryan. The car was on fire with a person trapped inside with serious injuries.

Erin extinguished the fire before the arrival of the Scotchtown Volunteer Fire Department. According to the fire department, Erin's interventions undoubtedly saved a life that day.

I ask the House to join me in thanking Erin for her quick intervention.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Shelburne.

ATHLETES: WINTER GAMES PARTIC. - CONGRATS.

NOLAN YOUNG: I rise today to recognize two young hockey players from Shelburne County who participated in the 2023 Canada Winter Games as part of Team Nova Scotia this past month.

Jessica MacKinnon, 16, has played hockey since she was five. She played forward for her team. Cohen Stoddard, 15, who has played hockey since he was seven, was in the net for his squad.

Mr. Speaker, I respectfully ask all members to join me in congratulating these young athletes, Jessica and Cohen. I am sure this is not the last time we will hear their names.

The women's team brought home the silver, competing for the first time ever in the medal round. Way to go, Jessica and team.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

THIBAUT, DENISE: CAN. GAMES MEDAL WIN - RECOG.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring to your attention the achievement of Denise Thibault, a Grade 12 student and a member of Clare's Bushino Ki Karate Club. Denise qualified for Team Nova Scotia in kumite karate in the 59-kilogram class, which was a new sport added to the Canada Games.

She previously represented the province at her sport's national competition, where she finished third in the youth category in 2018. However, the Canada Games marked her first multi-sport event. Despite being new to this level of competition, Denise performed exceptionally well, reaching the semi-finals in her class and bringing home a bronze medal.

I ask all members to join me in congratulating Denise Thibault on her outstanding achievement at the Canada Games and wishing her success in her future competitions.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

STUDENTS: *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST JR.* PRODUCTION - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, I think everyone in this Chamber can agree that the arts bring a vital sense of community into our constituencies. Even better is when young people immerse themselves in the arts.

Today, I couldn't be more honoured to recognize the Grades 5 and 6 students of LeMarchant-St. Thomas Elementary School. This past February, they put on a fabulous production of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast JR.* Over 60 students worked together to bring this production to life and present it to the community with the help of kind and dedicated LeMarchant teachers, fellow students, and parents. The show had a fully sold-out performance - a true testament to everyone's hard work to bring the production to life.

I ask my fellow members to join me in recognizing the LeMarchant-St. Thomas Elementary community for a successful run of *Beauty and the Beast JR.*

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Pictou Centre.

VOLUNTEERS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS N.S. - THANKS

HON. PAT DUNN: Mr. Speaker, Special Olympics Nova Scotia is a wonderful organization dedicated to enriching the lives of Nova Scotians with an intellectual disability through numerous sports.

The province-wide group of volunteers employ a staff of five to promote, administer, and coordinate many activities of over 2,100 athletes and program participants. Celebrating the Special Olympics athletes has been very rewarding for volunteers due to the unique qualities of the participants: who they are and the gifts of kindness to others they bring to their competition.

Thank you to the hundreds of volunteers who continue to be involved with this wonderful organization.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

CPAHS STUDENTS: BASK. CH'SHIP WIN - CONGRATS.

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Speaker, today I would like to recognize the CPA boys basketball team for winning their second consecutive Division 1 boys basketball provincial championship earlier this month. They defeated Citadel High in the final, 87 to 81. It is a tremendous achievement.

I actually helped coach the team up until a few years ago. Then as soon as I left, they started winning championships. (Laughter) A coincidence, I'm sure. Nonetheless, I'm happy to see their success. Head coach Steve Harris, whom I coached with for several years, is a wonderful guy. I know all the kids put in a ton of hours between October and March to actually get through a high school basketball season.

It has been a very tough week, of course, for CPA, but this is a great achievement earlier this month. Again, congratulations to the boys basketball team on back-to-back championships.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Guysborough-Tracadie.

ARTWORKS EAST: SUPPORT FOR VISUAL ARTS - CONGRATS.

HON. GREG MORROW: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize ArtWorks East in Guysborough.

ArtWorks East is an association of visual artists and crafters who live in Guysborough County. They started in 2019 as a non-profit group that welcomes local

artisans of all ages and levels of experience, as well as those who want to support the visual arts in the Guysborough area.

ArtWorks East's vision is "a community where the skills and related products of the visual arts and crafts are appreciated, shared, taught, promoted, and purchased by residents and visitors, both young and old." Recently, the artisans have put on workshops for residents to offer them a chance to explore creating their own art work.

For the past two Summers, they have partnered with the Guysborough Waterfront using their building as a gallery, and were also able to provide Summer employment for students. Their gallery is set up with nature's own backdrop, the ocean, and is the perfect setting for the artworks that are on display. These local artists have been able to showcase their incredible talents here and in various businesses throughout the county.

I want to congratulate ArtWorks East in creating this opportunity for local artists, and wish them all the continued success as their association grows.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

SAXON, DR. MICHELE: QUEEN'S PLAT. JUB. MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

CARMAN KERR: Mr. Speaker, one of the personal highlights of my time as MLA so far was having the honour of presenting constituents with the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal. This medal commemorates the 70th anniversary of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's ascension to the throne as Queen of Canada, and recognizes exceptional Nova Scotians who work tirelessly to make their communities even better places to live, work, and play.

One constituent whom I had the pleasure of presenting the medal to is Dr. Michele Saxon. Michele is a family physician who is heavily engaged in efforts to recruit new health care professionals to underserved rural Nova Scotia communities, including through serving as a practice-ready assessment program clinical field assessor. She is certainly a very deserving recipient of this award.

I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Dr. Michele Saxon on receiving the Nova Scotia Platinum Jubilee Medal and in thanking her for years of service to her community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Chester-St. Margaret's.

STARFISH REUNITES: HELP FOR IMMIGRANTS - RECOG.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Starfish Reunites. This group was started six years ago with a small group of residents in the village of Chester who decided to help their Syrian contacts affected by tragedies.

The Starfish Refugee Project encompasses Starfish Reunites as the new extension of this project. To date, they have sponsored and supported 21 individuals. The members of this organization are tasked with helping individuals in a multitude of ways, including assisting with transportation and language skills training. From the time the immigrants arrive in Canada, the help is ongoing.

This group, located at St. Stephen's Parish in Chester, always welcomes new volunteers, especially following the recent earthquake in Türkiye. They are on the path to reach their fundraising goal of \$40,000.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in recognizing the excellent work of Starfish Reunites.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

WAYE, JOE: QUEEN'S PLAT. JUB. MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Speaker, over the last number of weeks, we have all had the honour of presenting Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medals. One recipient that I want to mention is Joe Waye. For 50 years, Joe Waye has been a jazz guitarist in our community. He has taught literally thousands of people. He has written books. He has held countless fundraisers for Doctors Without Borders, the Canadian Cancer Society. It was an honour for me to recognize Joe at his annual Boxing Day event in Sydney. Again, another important fundraiser in the community.

As I said, for 50 years Joe has played that guitar. He has taught hundreds of people, and he has been an inspiration in the music community in the CBRM and beyond.

I rise in my place because I also know that his wife, Janice Waye, is my constituency assistant and she is watching right now. Joe, congratulations so well-deserved on your Queen's Platinum Jubilee medal. A big thank you, not only from me but from everybody in the community you've impacted through your music.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens.

SMITH, ABIGAIL: CAN. GAMES MEDAL WIN - CONGRATS.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, in April last year, I rose to wish Queens County judo athlete Abigail Smith the best as she strove to fulfill her goal of representing our province at the Canada Games. Today, I rise to tell you that not only did she make

Team Nova Scotia for the recent 2023 Winter Games in PEI, she won one of our province's record-setting 24 medals.

She started in the sport at age four and half, and in a showing of true determination and unwavering focus, 15-year-old Abigail made the team, travelled to compete, and claimed the bronze medal in the Under-70 kg Female Division at the Games.

I ask all members to join me in congratulating Abigail on this very impressive accomplishment. All of Queens County is so proud of you, Abigail. We wish you much continued success in your sport in the months and years ahead. You are truly an inspiration, girl.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

INCOME ASSISTANCE: NEED TO INCREASE - RECOG.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, I just want to take a few minutes to talk about today's budget and what I didn't see there, and why that concerns me.

What we didn't see there was an increase for people who are receiving income assistance. Now for those of us who work in constituency offices, we know that income assistance is not a lot of money, and we know that rent has been going up. We know that food costs have been going up. I have no idea how people on income assistance are living through this past year and a half, where we have seen this rapid price escalation.

We saw legislation tabled earlier this week that will actually allow the rent cap to increase for the next couple of years, beginning next year. Then in 2025, it will go up by 5 per cent. I don't know where people on income assistance are supposed to come up with that money. I am deeply concerned. We did not see an increase in income assistance.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I just wanted to make the member aware that the rent increase that she talked about is a bill that is before the House and can't be discussed at this point. (Interruption)

Yes, but that is a bill before the House - raising the rent - is it not? (Interruption) You talked about raising the cap. There is a bill before the House, and it hasn't come into effect. (Interruption)

Okay, I'll grant you the benefit. I'll give you an extra 15 seconds.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, I would like to put this up on my Facebook page. My problem is that now I've had an interruption, so could I please start my member statement over?

[2:45 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: This is becoming a challenge at this point. We have to realize that what you do in a member statement, you can do whenever you want. You don't necessarily have to say where I called you to order on something. That doesn't have to be part of your member statement.

If there are items that need to be discussed, they can be brought up during Question Period. I think the intent is to try to get some answers as to why some things are happening and some things aren't. That's what Question Period is for.

KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, I want to make sure that all members of the House can actually understand what's going on here because we had member statements about what was in the budget earlier today. Mine was about what was in the budget and the fact that, in fact, we have rent increases coming.

THE SPEAKER: Okay. We're going to put this to rest now. It started off with the member for Halifax Atlantic speaking about what wasn't in the budget. You started your remarks with what wasn't in the budget.

You want to talk about something that is a bill that's on the Order Paper and the course should be followed to have the discussion in the proper way.

KELLY REGAN: So I just want to understand that I make sure that we all understand that from now on, in a member statement, we cannot discuss a bill that's before the House. Is that correct? Is that what we're saying here?

THE SPEAKER: I believe that's always been the rule. That has always been the rule. You cannot discuss a bill before the House in a member statement.

Rather than create a lot of confusion and drag this whole thing out, we will make a ruling tomorrow. That will give us a chance to search the book and lay the law down.

Now after all that, we have 10-minutes left before we go into Question Period.

The honourable member for Antigonish.

PAUL, ROSE: INCLUSION IN *ATL. BUS. MAG. LIST* - CONGRATS.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, I rise to congratulate Rose Paul. Rose has recently been recognized by *Atlantic Business Magazine* as one of Atlantic Canada's most Powerful Women in Business.

The twenty-five women who were honoured have had significant direct impact on the business community. These women are change-makers whose power extends beyond the context of their jobs to influence their industry and the broader community.

Rose has dedicated her life to being a leader in her community and helping her Mi'kmaw community grow. As CEO of Bayside Development Corporation, she plans to increase employment and business creation, and a partnership with EverWind Fuels will move the community toward net zero.

I ask all members of this House to congratulate Rose and wish her continued success.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

ATHLETES: CAN. WINTER GAMES PERF. - CONGRATS.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, I too would like to recognize some athletes from Team Nova Scotia. I'd like to recognize Kandice Verge and Abigail Smith, who both won medals in judo at the recent Canada Games. They are true inspirations for all hard-working and dedicated youth.

To the entire team, congratulations, and a special congratulations to Coach Jason Scott, who actually grew up in my community. Abigail and Kandice are amazing. They did a great job. They're hard-working and true inspirations to all Nova Scotians, both male and female. I just want to say to Jason, thank you for all you do for our youth in our community and all across Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Pictou West.

PICTOU WEST FOOD BANK VOLUNS.: COM. SERV. - THANKS

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: I rise today to thank all the volunteers who work and support the Pictou West Food Bank. There are far too many past and present volunteers for me to name; however, I want each of them to know how important and valuable they are to our community.

For as long as I can remember, the food bank operated in the basement of the Pictou Town Office. It was a shared space, not accessible, and was comprised of many small rooms not conducive to food handling.

The food bank recently was able to purchase a building in downtown Pictou that will be accessible and more conducive to meeting the needs of residents. Some of the programs and services offered by the Pictou West Food Bank include the McCulloch Education Centre's backpack program, meals for Pictou Academy students, support for Viola's Place, Tearmann House, and the weekly soup luncheon at the Presbyterian First Church Hall.

Mr. Speaker, I say a heartfelt thank you to the volunteers who donate their time and talent at the Pictou West Food Bank.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

EUSTAQUIO-DOMONDON, ELIZABETH: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I rise today to recognize Elizabeth Eustaquio-Domondon. In January, I had the honour of awarding Elizabeth the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal. I would like to recognize Elizabeth for her work as a Filipino-Canadian leader and mentor.

She was born and raised in the Philippines and immigrated to Canada in 1998. She's the former president of the Filipino Association of Nova Scotia, FANS, and an honorary consul for the Philippine Consulate of Halifax. Elizabeth is currently a program coordinator for the Internationally Educated Nurses Orientation Program for ISANS. She has organized various social and cultural events to bring the community together and assisted many Filipino nationals, temporary foreign workers, and new immigrant families as they navigate their settlement and integration in Nova Scotia.

I would like to thank Elizabeth for being a strong advocate for Asian voices and a leader in the Filipino community. We are so lucky to have someone like Elizabeth in Clayton Park West.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Richmond.

SCANTLEBURY, MAJ. LYDIA: MILITARY CAREER - RECOG.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Today I would like to acknowledge the career of Major Lydia Scantlebury.

Major Lydia Scantlebury grew up in Louisdale, the daughter of Emily and Bobby Joyce, and graduated from Isle Madame District High in 1991. Lydia joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1999 as a resource management clerk and went on to receive her commission as a logistics officer in 2006. While employed as a logistics officer, she obtained her law degree from the University of New Brunswick, and now serves as a member of the Office of the Judge Advocate General.

She is currently deployed as the legal advisor to the Joint Task Force Impact Headquarters in Kuwait, advising the Task Force Commander on matters of discipline, as well as operational and administrative law. When Lydia returns home in the Spring, she will resume her duties as the Deputy Judge Advocate of 5th Canadian Division Support Base Gagetown in New Brunswick, where she lives with her husband, Major Tim Scantlebury, and their son Declan.

Please join me in acknowledging Major Scantlebury and her outstanding contribution to our country.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FOUR COM. GRPS.: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

FRED TILLEY: I would like to take the opportunity to recognize four community groups in our community that are doing a fantastic job for the residents.

First of all, the Cantley Village Recreation Association puts on all kinds of activities and events for the residents of Cantley Village and surrounding areas. The Friends of Petersfield Park in Westmount do a great job of keeping that park open during the Winter months when the department doesn't do the services there.

Two groups on the Northside: the Northside Boys, a custom car group, do a wonderful job in our community raising community funds for hospitals and other wonderful projects, and they just bring a sense of pride to the community; also, the Northside Gals are doing a wonderful job of bringing awareness to issues in our community. They have an event tonight that I would like to wish them a wonderful event for.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings West.

STEADMAN, BROOKE: QPJ MEDAL RECIP. - CONGRATS.

CHRIS PALMER: I rise today to recognize a Kings West resident I was proud to present with a Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal, Miss Brooke Steadman.

Brooke was awarded this medal for her many contributions and involvement in her community as a youth. Brooke, a graduate of West Kings High School, has been involved in the Scouting movement since her early childhood, winning the Queen's Venturer Medal in 2020, and has contributed to many other activities in both school and her community.

Brooke has volunteered as a youth in the Gala Day celebrations in Berwick and was nominated for the Young Woman of Excellence Award as part of the Annapolis Valley

Chamber of Commerce Women of Excellence Awards in 2022. This award is given to a young woman with a bright future.

Brooke is a well-rounded woman with diverse interests who is making her community, school, and various organizations even better through her engagement. Brooke influences and inspires others through her leadership, creativity, and positive attitude.

Please join me in thanking Brooke for her dedication to her community and congratulate her on receiving the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

CLARE LOUPS: HOCKEY CH'SHIP WIN - CONGRATS.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Le jeudi 16 février dernier l'équipe de hockey féminin des Loups de l'École secondaire de Clare a pour la toute première fois remporté le championnat régional de hockey pour les filles du secondaire.

Pour la première fois, dans plusieurs années l'École secondaire de Clare a eu une équipe de hockey féminin avec 19 filles de ESDC et trois filles de l'École secondaire de Par-en-Bas. Ensemble l'équipe a rapporté les régionaux deux à un contre les Bridgetown Hawks.

Monsieur le président, je souhaite profiter de cette occasion pour féliciter l'équipe des Clare Loups pour rapporter ce championnat, et je leurs souhaite du succès dans les années à venir.

Mr. Speaker, on Thursday, February 16th, the l'École secondaire de Clare Loups girl's hockey team won the regional high school girl's hockey championship for the very first time. For the first time in many years École secondaire de Clare had a female hockey team with 19 girls from ESDC and three girls from École secondaire de Par-en-Bas. Together the team won the regionals two to one against the Bridgetown Hawks.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Clare Loups for bringing home this championship, and I wish them success in the years to come. Merci.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton East.

MLA FOR GLACE BAY-DOMINION - BIRTHDAY WISHES

HON. BRIAN COMER: Mr. Speaker, I heard there's a birthday in the Legislature today, the very hard-working MLA for Glace Bay-Dominion. I want to wish Johnny White a happy birthday. (Applause).

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. That would be the member for Glace Bay-Dominion. Do not use proper names.

Happy birthday to the member.

Order, please. Thank goodness I was able to do that.

The time for Statements by Members has expired. We move into the order of business, Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers. The time is 2:58 p.m. We will go until 3:48 p.m.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: POWER GRID STRENGTH - ENSURE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, we are hearing from Nova Scotians who are deeply concerned about the power rate that is going to be impacting their households. Also we're concerned about the fact that the Premier's ill-thought-out intervention in the space has actually made the situation worse for ratepayers because it was recently reported that Nova Scotia Power, because of their downgrading in their credit rating, is going to have less money to put into maintenance to make sure that our grid is resilient against storms and weather, to make sure that we can get the lights back on when these weather events happen.

My question to the Premier is: How is he going to make up for this political fumble and actually ensure that our power grid is strong at the same time that Nova Scotians are actually going to be paying more for power?

THE PREMIER: I want to thank the Leader of the Official Opposition, the defender of Nova Scotia Power, for bringing this important question to the floor of the Legislature.

On this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, we are concerned about ratepayers. On the other side they can defend Nova Scotia Power in their own fumbling of dealing with their stakeholders, but on this side of the House it is ratepayers, ratepayers, ratepayers. Even the UARB acknowledged that Bill No. 212 did exactly what it was meant to do.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, does he not think that ratepayers care about the 14 per cent increase that they are going to have in their power bill? Does he not think it's ratepayers and Nova Scotians who are going to be impacted by a less resilient grid because

there's less capital money going into maintenance? Does he not think that those things impact ratepayers when their power goes off because of a storm?

[3:00 p.m.]

Not only are Nova Scotians paying more for power for a less reliable grid, but this Premier has also damaged our ability to invest in renewable energy, and we will not hit our renewable energy targets by 2030. That means that long term, ratepayers are going to be paying more for more expensive fossil fuels and for cheaper renewable power.

Mr. Speaker, what does the Premier have to say for himself?

THE PREMIER: The Leader of the Opposition is just wrong. He's just wrong. Maybe he's been too busy cozying up to the executives at Nova Scotia Power to notice, but we actually put a bill in this Legislature yesterday to hold them to account. The only thing we want from a utility - we want a strong utility, but we want reliable energy at a fair price, and we will keep moving that forward.

The member should know. The member should know that the fuel adjustment, which is contributing to the rate increase, has been there since the beginning. It happened under prior governments. It happened under this government. But the rate increase would be much higher if not for Bill No. 212. At the time, the member supported it, but now he supports Nova Scotia Power.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, I'll happily showcase the record of the previous government, who held power rates to 1.5 per cent for eight years. We had rate stability in this province for the duration of that period until this government took over, tried to play politics with power, and messed it all up. Now Nova Scotians are paying more for power and for a less-reliable grid, and we're going to miss our renewable energy targets, all because this Premier puts politics ahead of good policy. Those are the facts.

When will the Premier fix this problem that he created?

THE PREMIER: The reality is the reason the grid is in such poor shape is because of the actions of that government. I can't believe how shameless they are, Mr. Speaker. The reason that our health care system is in the state it's in is because of that government.

We are investing in Nova Scotians. We are investing in the future. We will hold those to account who are meant to do a job on behalf of Nova Scotians.

We'll hold Nova Scotia Power to account. The member will have to decide if he stands with Nova Scotia Power or if he stands with this side, who stands with the ratepayers.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

PREM.: PRIMARY CARE ACCESS - EXPAND

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, with 137,000 people on the wait-list for a family doctor, the government today tabled a budget with a tiny drop dedicated to expanding access to consistent primary care.

Right now, there are thousands of people trying to get prescriptions refilled, trying and failing to get their kids into a walk-in clinic, and waiting and waiting and waiting for some way that they can be assured that they will come off this list and be attached to consistent care.

Does the Premier really think this is good enough?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, we tabled a budget today that invests \$6.5 billion in health care. For somebody to have the audacity to refer to that as a drop in the bucket might be referred to as negative.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I will channel the optimism of the 137,000 people waiting for primary care when I ask about the fraction - the infinitesimal fraction - of that \$6.5 billion that will have an upstream impact on people waiting to be attached to care.

Anyone who knows someone with a cancer diagnosis, with a chronic illness, with a complicated pregnancy, or with controlled medication that needs to be refilled or titrated knows that it is crucial to be able to access a family health provider or team of providers. These are the folks who can't get the help they need virtually or at a walk-in or in a pharmacy. These are the people who leave the ER every day without being seen.

Mr. Speaker, why has the Premier introduced a budget with no significant plan for expansion of family health teams across this province?

THE PREMIER: I just disagree with the member, Mr. Speaker.

What I would say to those Nova Scotians who are on the list is that we want to attach them to a health home, to primary care, for sure. But I would remind them that just because they're on the list doesn't mean that they don't have access to care. There will be those who try to push that narrative, but there is access to care.

One hundred per cent of the people on that list have access to virtual care, and 57,000 Nova Scotians have actually signed up for virtual care. Almost 97,000 people on that list have access to a primary care clinic where they can seek medical treatment, in person or virtually.

What I would leave the member with is this: When we came in, Mr. Speaker, it was just a list of names. We're now working hard to prioritize that list to make sure that those who need the most urgent care are treated urgently. They're not just a name on a list like what was left to us by the prior government.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: What we are trying to encourage is to avoid the need for that urgent care in the first place, which means that people need to be attached to primary care, Mr. Speaker. This is why British Columbia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and even the Alberta NDP, who are likely to form government, have all begun to roll out and propose serious investments and incentives in primary health care so that people in those provinces can have a family health home.

Oh, I'm sorry. Are you sad about the Conservatives losing? Meanwhile, we have a government that is not even trying to reduce the ballooning number of people on the Need a Family Practice Registry. Yet there are a lot of dollars in the budget for health care, but I would like to remind the Premier that there's no budget line for people who don't have access to health care.

Mr. Speaker, how much longer are people in this province going to have to wait for consistent access to primary care?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, the health leadership team is incredible. I know that the member referred to the NSHA as awful people, but the health leadership team is working very hard under the minister's leadership, working extremely hard.

What I would say is, buried in the barrage of negativity was one of the most positive sprouts of optimism I've ever seen when she referred to the Alberta elections. Very positive; very unlikely, though, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: PROVINCE'S PROBLEMS - ACT

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, this Premier, in his time in office, has overseen now the first power rate hike that's happened in eight years. He has overseen the fastest growth in the Need a Family Practice wait-list that this province has ever seen. It's more than doubled and more than tripled here in Halifax. He's overseen a doubling of ER closures. He is overseeing all of these things and yet all he can offer this House is blame of past governments and the current federal government.

My question to the Premier is: When is he actually going to take responsibility for being Premier of this province?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, members would know that the investments we're making in the film industry and the opportunity we see for the film industry in this province. On Netflix, I saw a series called *Shameless*. I think they could actually come here and film a couple of episodes just focused on the Liberal Party. They left this province in one world of a mess.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition has the floor.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, we see it again. At a time when more Nova Scotians are struggling to find a family doctor than ever before. At a time when walk-in clinics are overburdened and closing down. At a time when more people are dying in our emergency rooms.

At a time when more Nova Scotians are faced with a cost-of-living pressure that is forcing them to make difficult decisions between putting food on their family's table or paying their power bills, the best that the Premier can offer this House is to pat himself on the back and blame everybody else for these problems.

The fact is, these things are happening under this Premier. Under his watch. Things are getting worse. When is he actually going to be the solution that he promised Nova Scotians he would be?

THE PREMIER: There's no question that there are challenges facing this province, absolutely, in the health care system. We know, and Nova Scotians see our dedication to that. They see the innovative changes that we're making. Nova Scotians see the efforts of the government to support those who are struggling.

An incredible budget was tabled today. There's \$14 billion of spending. Yet, the Opposition couldn't even acknowledge one dollar that would do good. The reality is this province is on the move. There are good things happening but, Mr. Speaker, don't take my word for it. Take former premier Stephen McNeil's word for it. He said, "Atlantic Canada" . . . (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Premier has the floor.

THE PREMIER: Please don't take my word for it, folks. This province is on the move. Maybe take the words of former premier Stephen McNeil, who said just the other day, "Atlantic Canada is alive and well, and quite frankly, a global player."

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

NRR: POWER RATES - CONTROL

CARMAN KERR: Mr. Speaker, on Tuesday, when I asked about the 14 per cent rate hike, Nova Scotia . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. Order, please. Order, please. Remember when I made a ruling about being cordial and friendly and all that stuff? In one ear and out the other, wasn't it?

The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: On Tuesday, when asked about the 14 per cent rate hike Nova Scotians can't afford, the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables said, and I quote: The UARB found that Bill No. 212 did its job. It did its job to protect ratepayers, and I'll table that. The minister's department disagreed with the settlement agreement, submitting to the UARB, and I quote, "The terms of the Settlement Agreement increase rates and contravene the purpose, spirit, and intent of Bill 212." I'll table that as well.

Mr. Speaker, it can't be both ways. His department stood in front of the UARB saying that the agreement does not comply with Bill No. 212, and that it increases rates, then told the House that it does comply with Bill No. 212 and keeps rate under control. What is it?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I thank the opposite member for the opportunity to speak about this. This is more of a question to direct toward the UARB. We did intervene. We did not agree with the deal that was done with everybody else and all the interveners, except for this side of the House, who stood with ratepayers, but in the findings, the UARB did say Bill No. 212 did its job and capped the rate for non-fuel costs at 1.8 per cent.

CARMAN KERR: I thank the minister for that response. After the UARB made that decision, the Premier sent them a letter stating, and I quote, "It is our shared responsibility to protect ratepayers and I can't state strongly enough how concerned I am that the agreement before you does not do that." I'll table that. The minister says that he has protected ratepayers. The Premier says the approved agreement does not protect ratepayers. To the minister or the Premier: Could you explain the contradicting messaging between yourself and your colleague?

TORY RUSHTON: What I said is I would stand with ratepayers, Mr. Speaker, and that's what I continue to do. I cannot control what the UARB does, an arm's-length independent entity. We gave them the tools we believe, as this is a government, that we would stay with ratepayers. We did not want to see any further increase in rates.

We said in the House last session, there's two sides of it. We were capping to what they could do with the non-fuel side. The fuel side was up for the UARB. That was a UARB decision, not ours. We still stay with ratepayers.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

FTB: COST OF LIVING RELIEF - PROVIDE

HON. KELLY REGAN: Over the course of the last calendar year, as Canadians struggled with some of the highest inflation numbers in years, from coast to coast to coast, we saw other provincial premiers take action to provide cost of living relief to the middle class. Hundreds of dollars of supports went to middle-class families in Ontario and Alberta, but here in Nova Scotia, the priority was not on keeping money in people's pockets, it was on government spending - creative accounting to hide huge tax windfalls and hidden tax increases. Mr. Speaker, has the government forgotten that it's not their money, it's Nova Scotians' money?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: It certainly is Nova Scotians' money, Mr. Speaker, and that's why the money the member's referencing was spent on health care, on housing, on affordability, and something else that was unforeseen, Hurricane Fiona.

KELLY REGAN: Mr. Speaker, we have had hurricanes before, and governments have supported citizens as they were needed during those times as well. All we have to do is look at our neighbours to see what cost of living relief actually looks like. We know that last year, Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick delivered significant supports to their people. In P.E.I., there were funded financial supports, plus the provincial government had frozen taxes and fees across the board, including property taxes, waste management fees, public transit rates, road tolls, and more.

We've continued to offer suggestions to this government for policies on how to help people of this province get through some really tough economic times. Will the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board implement even just one of those to help the middle class and the people who want to join them?

ALLAN MACMASTER: There are a number of initiatives in the budget because we care about people and the experiences that they're facing at a time where we're experiencing inflation. One of the things we made a strong stand against was the Liberal carbon tax.

When we came to government just 18 months ago, the Nova Scotia Child Benefit sat at \$925. Today, with the budget, we're moving that to \$1,525.

There was no Seniors Care Grant at that time. Today there is. This past year was \$1,000, recognizing the increased cost of living because of fossil fuel prices. Today it comes back in our budget for \$500.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

DHW: IMPORTANCE OF PARAMEDICS - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. We are in critical need of support for and investment in our emergency response infrastructure. We are seeing paramedics having to work 12- to 14-hour shifts, and have seen response times in the Central Zone jump from eight or nine minutes just a few years ago to 27 minutes now. Today's budget responds to this crisis with a move towards single-paramedic response units, an initiative that has faced criticism from paramedics for putting patient and paramedic safety at risk.

[3:15 p.m.]

Can the minister explain why today's budget is so disconnected from the emergency care crisis that Nova Scotia's health system is facing?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I would like to say that the SPEAR unit is actually a very innovative way to support people who don't need emergency care. We know that there are some people who call 911 for a variety of reasons - most certainly because they need assistance. But the physicians in medical comms working with paramedics in the field have actually been able to support four out of ten individuals in community to be diverted away from the emergency room for the appropriate care (Inaudible) community.

We are investing in primary health care, emergency services, workforce strategy, surgical access, cancer care, and patient flow. I don't think any of those are disconnected from the health care of Nova Scotians.

SUSAN LEBLANC: We all know the challenges facing our province's paramedics, and we know our emergency care system is at a breaking point. Paramedics are feeling left behind, and they are looking to the government for support to be able to continue in their profession: serving Nova Scotians.

This budget saw an expansion of the More Opportunities for Skilled Trades tax rebate to certain health care workers and emergency medical care, but excluded paramedics entirely.

In a time when we are facing unprecedented emergency response times, paramedic resignations and vacancies, and unsustainable working conditions, why is the government refusing to support and recognize the importance of the paramedics?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: I want to assure the member that we continue to invest in paramedics in the EHS system. We have invested \$3.5 million in equipment to prevent injury. We've implemented double overtime for paramedics in recognition that they need to stay sometimes after their shifts. We've covered a benefit that was a great cost to

paramedics, resulting in \$2,500 more per year in their pockets. We offered them a \$5,000 bonus. We have a workforce planning group that meets on a monthly basis to support paramedics. EMCI has a strategic working group made up of paramedics.

We are very committed to paramedics in this province. We have actually asked the union to go back to the table so that we can - at a table - talk about the things that are important to paramedics, and give them the work-life balance they want.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

MAH: PROPERTY TAXES - FREEZE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Speaker, speaking of property taxes, homeowners across the province were hit with big spikes in their property tax bills this past year. Between that and mortgage rates going up and up, we've got more and more people considered house-poor due to the unstable housing market. Our neighbours in Prince Edward Island have seen the tough situation their people are in, and they have frozen property taxes for the upcoming year.

Will this government follow the leadership of our neighbouring province and freeze property taxes for the next year?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I would just like to point out that in Nova Scotia, we have a system where we have the Property Valuation Services Corporation, which is owned by the 49 municipalities. Property Valuation Services Corp. sets the value of every property in the province annually.

The municipalities themselves decide on their own tax rates within each jurisdiction based on how much money they need. We have done an enormous number of things that help the municipalities. We work very closely with them. So the tax question you are asking is better directed toward our municipal partners.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Well, if we can't come to an agreement with the municipalities about property taxes, they should at least be interested in helping with commuting costs. Public transit authorities, including Halifax Transit, are contemplating fare hikes for 2023, and this government has a huge surplus from the motive fuel tax - a surplus that the Finance and Treasury Board Minister said wouldn't exist. I can table that quote. The government could give some of that back to the taxpayers who are footing the bill for the fuel tax freeze.

Will this government take action in helping people afford to get back to work?

THE SPEAKER: I ask the member to table that, please.

The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

ALLAN MACMASTER: There is no windfall from the fuel excise tax. The budget forecast shows that. It is a flat tax. It does not move up with the price of fuel. One thing we know in this province is that people have to drive. They have to drive to go to work and drive to get their groceries. Despite increases in the price of fuel, demand stays pretty consistent. This is exactly why a carbon tax won't work in this province. This is why the 14 cents per litre that we added to gasoline for Nova Scotians through the Liberal carbon tax coming in July is something Nova Scotians do not need.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

FTB: EXCESSIVE SPENDING - JUSTIFY

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Speaker, on Budget Day, I think it's important that we talk about transparency and accountability when it comes to spending tax dollars of Nova Scotians. That brings me to the issue of additional appropriations. This fiscal year, this government spent \$1.6 billion in additional appropriations, including \$578 million this month alone. That's billions of dollars that it has spent outside of the budget process with very little accountability or transparency.

I would like to ask the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board: How can he justify this absurd level of March Madness spending?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: When the member was asking the question, I even heard the word "shame" coming from the Opposition. I wonder, was it shameful that we invested \$123.5 million in expanding the Heating Assistance Rebate Program? This was at a time when the Opposition was also calling for the government to do something to help people with the cost of living. We did that before the heating season started, and we did it to help people with the cost of living. I don't think that was a shameful investment. I can list a bunch more here, which I'm prepared to do when I have my next opportunity.

BRAEDON CLARK: If we want to use the word "shameful" as well, I think it's shameful that this government will spend 10 per cent of the overall budget without bringing it to the floor of the Legislature, where they have a majority, and the outcome is preordained. What's there to be scared of? They have the votes.

The Auditor General of this province has criticized this practice, saying it "lacks accountability and transparency, that Nova Scotia is offside from the rest of the country." In response, the Finance and Treasury Board Minister's department rejected this advice wholesale, claiming that \$1.6 billion in excess spending beyond the budget is, "appropriately transparent." I will table that as well.

Does the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board agree that spending \$1.6 billion outside of the normal process is appropriately transparent?

ALLAN MACMASTER: That is actually a decision for elected members to make. In 2010, the elected members of the NDP government created this change to set the process in place to what it is today. Before our government was elected just 18 months ago, the Liberal government used the same system that is in practice today. (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board has the floor.

ALLAN MACMASTER: Every day we sit in this Chamber, we hear calls from the Opposition to spend money. I don't know why they have a problem with us helping people lower their cost of heating or have a problem with us helping people gain access to housing, or helping people who are recovering from Hurricane Fiona.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

DCS: BASIC NEEDS - SUPPORT

HON. BEN JESSOME: Mr. Speaker, there are many Nova Scotians being pushed financially past the point of no return into cyclical poverty due to the PC government's lack of focus on affordability. We know that homelessness has hit an all-time high, and those in need of public housing is on the rise. We know that the cost of living is dramatically outpacing Nova Scotians' ability, and current supports are not keeping up. We also know that this government is willing to watch rent increase 5 per cent, and income assistance rates are not keeping up.

I would like to ask the Minister of Community Services if she asked the Premier and the Cabinet to increase income assistance rates in this budget.

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: Those challenges that people are facing with regard to poverty and homelessness are matters that we collectively know have to be addressed through all departments within government - and all levels of government: municipal, provincial, and federal. That is why we work together to come up with solutions to help individuals - whether it's heating rebates, increasing food security, ensuring that they can find permanent housing, the Seniors Care Grant, a Child Tax Benefit increase, and so on.

BEN JESSOME: The challenge with the approach to affordability that this government is taking is that people don't know where it's coming from, and predictability is a big part of being financially secure. We know that when people are financially secure, they have a stronger ability to improve themselves. They have the confidence to know that they have food on the table. They have the ability to leave abusive relationships. We know

how important financial security is when it comes to meeting their basic needs. This scattered approach is difficult for people to predict and have confidence in their household budgets.

I would like to ask the minister when the PC government can confidently say they will support Nova Scotians to meet their basic needs.

KARLA MACFARLANE: I think this budget speaks volumes that we're supporting Nova Scotians. We know that all Nova Scotians want to provide for themselves. We know that they want to be able to have a sense of belonging and contribute to their communities. That's why we look at an approach in helping individuals through all kinds of different departments.

We're constantly in collaboration - and with all levels of government - to ensure that we can help in many ways, whether that is rental supplement increases. We take a targeted focus approach. We'll continue working for individuals. We know that there are global challenges that we face. We know that we will continue helping Nova Scotians the best way we possibly can.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

MAH: AFFORDABLE NON-MARKET HOUSING - SUPPORT

SUZY HANSEN: My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. In the midst of an unprecedented housing crisis, and in the wake of a capital plan that invested zero dollars into building new housing units, our caucus waited and hoped for a budget that would have a significant investment in building non-market housing. Instead, we were sorely disappointed by a budget that doubles down on the approach of funnelling public money to private landlords through more money for rent supplements, which will certainly help some people, but will certainly not build new, affordable, non-market housing units.

Why does this government continue to neglect the need for truly affordable non-market housing?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I am extraordinarily proud of our budget. We're seeing a \$150 million increase in the Municipal Affairs and Housing budget this year. The last 18 months, we have invested almost \$200 million in a variety of different forms of housing. As far as non-market housing - or public housing if you want to call it that - we are actually near the top in Canada per capita in public housing right now.

We know that we have a mandate from the Auditor General to address problems in public housing, which we are doing. This year, we will spend \$20 million in upgrading

public housing. I know that is badly needed. We have a mandate from the Auditor General to deal with problems in public housing, and we'll continue to do that.

[3:30 p.m.]

SUZY HANSEN: I thank you for that response. I was really thrown aback when the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board said we're here, we're helping people - yet the Budget Address for housing was a mere page worth.

The government continues to announce funding for landlords who are going to build housing that is not affordable, in line with the CMHC definition of 30 per cent of rent geared to income. For example, the recently announced \$9 million for new units across the province - many built by run-of-the-mill for-profit landlords - will be rents at or below 80 per cent the local market average. The new NSCC housing that will be built in Dartmouth that is supposed to be affordable, says: All rates and fees will be determined based on fair market averages.

Mr. Speaker, can the minister see that nothing here is going to be what we desperately need - more truly affordable housing?

JOHN LOHR: What we desperately need is more housing supply and we're working on that too. And that fundamentally is the only real solution. However, the 8,000 rent supplements that we will have this year, that makes a huge difference to people.

All of the different programs we're having across the spectrum address this. So we don't need - like if you think about the problems we have in health care. We need housing for health care. We've just spent \$20 million on modular housing, but the reality is we need housing across the spectrum for employers to have places for their people to live across the province.

So we're addressing not just one segment of the market, we're addressing all of these different elements of the housing market. There's no one particular solution. But we couldn't possibly be doing more; we have made massive increases in funding across the spectrum...

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

FTB: TAX BRACKETS - INDEX

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, when March Madness rolls around each year, you often find people filling out their college basketball brackets. This year I chose Duke and did horrible. And I just wanted to bring up the subject of brackets today, because Nova Scotia is one of the only provinces in the country that doesn't index its tax

brackets to inflation. CFIB has described this a hidden tax hike on the taxpayers of Nova Scotia every year.

If the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board isn't going to help Nova Scotia taxpayers get ahead, can he at least allow them to catch up to the rest of the country and eliminate this tax?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, once again we're hearing about our government spending money. I wonder if the Opposition would disagree with the health care worker retention incentives just announced? Three hundred fifty-four million dollars, and you know what? With more health care workers living and staying in the system here in Nova Scotia, we're going to save money. So that is an investment.

Our focus is on the health care system. It's going to cost money to fix it. That's something that's going to benefit every single Nova Scotian.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm a little confused with that answer. I thought my question was pretty clear, and the minister did nothing to answer the question, actually. This will actually benefit those health care workers and all Nova Scotians.

Past governments had taken action to adjust brackets and give the middle class a tax break, but this government hasn't committed to tax relief for Nova Scotia, and it won't commit to ending bracket creep. Since the Premier won't answer the question, does the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board believe the working class and middle-class Nova Scotians are actually getting ahead under his leadership?

ALLAN MACMASTER: That member's own colleague, in response to the budget today, raised a concern about the debt. Despite the fact that in their last budget they had a higher debt-to-GDP ratio projected in the future, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board has the floor.

ALLAN MACMASTER: We are focused on fixing health care. There is no question, we would love to be able to reduce people's taxes. But right now, we are fixing health care. We are running deficit budgets in an effort to fix health care. Let us focus on that and fix it, because it's something that is good for every Nova Scotian, and it's something that is very important for a province that's growing.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

SNSIS: HIGHER VACANCY RATE - COMMIT

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Speaker, earlier this week the government was dragged kicking and screaming to extend the rent cap here in Nova Scotia for another two years. The cap is now due to expire December 31, 2025, which for Nova Scotians who have been paying attention will notice that all of our province's ills will magically be cured in the year 2025, which is also, conveniently, an election year.

I do want to say, if this government wants to eliminate the rental gap, which I believe they do, they will need to drastically increase the vacancy rate to get it to a healthy measure before it can remove the cap.

I'd like to ask the minister: Will this government commit to meeting the CMHC target of a healthy market, which is at least 3 per cent rental vacancies, before eliminating the cap, instead of just applying a political deadline?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: As there is a bill on the floor of the Legislature pertaining to this, I guess we're getting a sneak peek of the members' comments at a later date in second reading, Mr. Speaker.

I want to reassure all members of this House and all Nova Scotians that we're focusing very hard on improving the housing situation in our province. My honourable colleague, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, listed off a number of initiatives to improve housing and to address the needs that are required in our province. I sure hope to God that the members support our budget, which is going to be supporting housing and supporting Nova Scotians in our province.

BRAEDON CLARK: On this question, I want to move to something that I think the minister and I agree on, at least in principle. Even with the 2 per cent cap that has been in place, we know that Nova Scotia has quickly become one of the most unaffordable places to live in the country.

In an interview last month, the Minister of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services said he was "aggressively looking at the need for a compliance and enforcement division to deal with residential tenancies." This is an issue that I've raised. We have a bill on the order paper on this issue as well.

Mr. Speaker, we have been pushing for this measure for quite some time. The minister has given indications in the past that they are at least considering it. I'd like to ask the minister: Will he commit to creating an enforcement unit within Residential Tenancies?

COLTON LEBLANC: I think credit should be given where credit is due. In fact, we started the work before the member introduced his Private Member's Bill, but I appreciate his support of the initiative.

Mr. Speaker, last Fall we engaged with a consultant to help inform my department of potential solutions that could be implemented here in Nova Scotia, understanding the breadth of work that is required to implement a compliance enforcement division that meets the needs of both tenants and landlords in our province. A report is expected later this Fall that could help inform us and certainly we'll have more to say in the future of how we can improve that.

That being said, we're certainly starting that work already, ensuring that Nova Scotia tenants and landlords understand their rights and responsibilities. We started that with awareness in education campaigns last Spring.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

FTB: INDEXING INCOME TAX BRACKETS - CONSIDER

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: There are many Nova Scotians struggling financially right now. Certainly, I see it in Cumberland County every day. We have the highest child poverty rate here in Nova Scotia - out of the entire country of Canada, the highest child poverty rate and the highest poverty rates in the country, tied with B.C.

We are one of the only provinces in the country - I'm going to bring it up again about the indexing - that do not index, based on inflation, both the income tax brackets and basic personal tax exemption.

Considering that poverty is directly related to poor health, can I ask the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board: Did he and his team consider indexing, like every other province in Canada, our income tax brackets?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, certainly we did. I want to say - I'll give an example - the Seniors' and Family Pharmacare plans, we did announce in the budget there will be no increases to fees for those programs. They are very important programs. They help with the cost of drugs for people, for Nova Scotians.

The costs do go up every year for that. That is a cost to taxpayers, but we have chosen in this budget to ensure that those fees do not go up for them.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I appreciate the response about Pharmacare but I'm going to share with you what I'm hearing from my seniors, and that is that they can't afford the fees that currently exist.

I literally just had a phone conversation with someone on Monday. She wants me to contact the Minister of Health and Wellness about it. I haven't had a chance yet. She cannot afford - she chose to work to the age of 67 and now she is being penalized because she is applying for Pharmacare now - there's a late fee - so she called me. She said, I chose to

work two more years to help in the workforce and I'm being penalized and have to pay higher fees to have Pharmacare and she can't afford the basic fee.

My question to the minister once again is: Will he consider indexing the basic personal tax exemption, as well as income tax brackets, like every other province?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, we will certainly continue to look at those measures. I will say that in terms of indexing tax brackets, the benefit actually accrues to higher income earners. What we've tried to focus on in our government, at this time of high inflation and when it is difficult for many Nova Scotians to be dealing with the cost of living, we've been focusing more so on targeted supports. The Seniors Care Grant, for instance, which would help the individual the member was speaking of. It's a new program, \$500 per year. We actually doubled it last year, so it was worth \$1,000 last year.

Add to that the Heating Assistance Rebate, which was increased, as well, to \$1,000 last year.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

DCS: INCOME ASSIST. PAYMENTS - RAISE

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Community Services.

It has been well-established in this Chamber that we are living through a cost of living crisis. Life has become more unaffordable for all Nova Scotians but especially for those most in need. Social assistance payments have not kept up with this reality. Despite calls for the indexing of income assistance benefits, or increases to overall rates, the government has refused to support people in a meaningful way.

Today's tabled budget not only failed to increase these supports, it actually slashed funding by \$20 million for income assistance payments. Why is this government turning its back on those most in need?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: I know the member is familiar with the system in addressing those who are on income assistance. I think that she would know that we don't deny anyone. We could actually have zero on that line in the budget because it has no cap. Income assistance has no cap. Anyone could be there. Anyone could come at any moment of the day and receive it.

When you see that removed, it's because that amount wasn't used last year. This year we might have to spend \$50 million and we will. No one will go unheeded.

KENDRA COOMBES: Then, Mr. Speaker, I suggest raising the rates. Part of this minister's mandate is to work towards the elimination of childhood poverty. This budget falls flat on this promise. Increases to the Nova Scotia Child Benefit are underwhelming and show how out of touch this government is with the depth of poverty in this province. For example, a family with one child and a household income of \$26,000 a year will only see a monthly increase of \$10. That's \$120 by the end of the year.

There were no changes mandated to the income threshold or to index to future inflation amounts, Mr. Speaker. Despite this government's commitments to addressing childhood poverty, we haven't seen them walk the talk. Families are . . .

THE SPEAKER: Question, please.

KENDRA COOMBES: Why has this government responded with so little?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Believe me, Mr. Speaker, it's deeply troubling to know that there are children living in poverty in Nova Scotia. What I will say is that we are working across all government departments.

Let me remind the member that in the last two years, we increased the Child Tax Benefit by \$600, which is a \$12.5 million investment. We have funded prevention and early intervention programs such as EDGE and Career Rising. We have \$10 daycare, educational supports, and the list goes on and on. I certainly don't mind sitting down with the member and sharing, because the list of what we have done is long.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

OAMH: HOUSING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE - ACTION

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, this winter, 32-year-old Tiffany Campbell spoke to CBC about her experience of being renovicted out of her first apartment since moving home to Nova Scotia and having to move, with her son, multiple times. Despite having a full scholarship, two part-time jobs, and no vehicle, she is still spending more than half of her income on housing and has to rely on the university food bank. I can table that.

She is one of a number of young people who have come forward to say that they feel forced to leave the province due to its unaffordable living conditions. I'd like to ask the minister responsible for youth: When will this government give young people a reason to believe that they can raise a family here?

HON. BRIAN COMER: I know my colleagues and Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services and Housing and Municipal Affairs are certainly looking into this serious issue. I would say it's a very collaborative approach across sectors, across government. It's certainly something we're working very hard on.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, I didn't understand a word. I don't know if it's the microphone, but I could not hear him. I would love to have an answer. I'm sorry. I did not understand.

[3:45 p.m.]

The same issue is hitting newcomers as well. For many years, this province worked hard at reversing the long-time trend of young people leaving to find work. Now that we are finally achieving this, we are finding that young people who move here cannot find a place they can afford to live or raise a family, or access basic services, in a way that's making it impossible for them to stay.

My question is to the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration this time: How does this government plan to continue to attract more people when they cannot find family doctors, they cannot find housing - all our . . .

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Mr. Speaker, as has been said, Nova Scotia is on the move. We know that our population has been growing. In 2021 we hit the one million mark for the first time in this province's history. We're also seeing record-breaking landings and recording-breaking numbers of permanent residents coming to this province. It's also really important to know that people are part of the solution. We are constantly being strategic about who are recruiting. We're using our immigration streams in a strategic way, to make sure that young people are also seeing themselves here to be successful in this province. We're using immigration, we're making sure that young people know they do have a place to live, and they do have a career here at home in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time for oral questions put by members to ministers has expired.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Second Reading?

PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 264.

Bill No. 264 - Electricity Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I move that Bill No. 264 be now read a second time.

This bill takes another step closer to a clean energy future for Nova Scotia, Mr. Speaker. There are a lot of moving parts in this transition. We know it can't happen overnight, but we're doing the work to take the steps to get there because Nova Scotians deserve clean, affordable, and reliable electricity. Our amendments to the Electricity Act will fast-track energy storage solutions. This includes things like large-scale batteries. As we add more renewable energy and electricity in Nova Scotia, we need to be able to store it because the sun doesn't shine every day, and the wind doesn't blow all the time.

These amendments allow government to procure energy storage options. Right now, only Nova Scotia Power can do that, but we need to have the flexibility to move faster on storage, so we're opening the game to private sector. It allows us to take advantage of innovations that are helping and working in fields in other jurisdictions and do that quickly. With these changes, we will be able to issue RFPs for energy storage solutions.

Most of you are familiar with the projects that resulted from an RFP for renewable electricity with the wind projects. We'll follow a similar process for energy storage. We're not excluding Nova Scotia Power from this process. We encourage them to pursue this adventure in storing electricity as well.

Our aim is to get more storage in our system faster, so we're also opening the opportunity to choose well-developed projects outside the RFP process. This allows us to be nimble and support the rapid development of innovative ideas. We'll only choose proposals that meet rigorous criteria, and the projects that go forward still have to do whatever permits or approvals that are required with other legislation. These will also help us look forward to writing the RFP processes in the future.

We'll consider any proposal that comes forward to us but based on our current technology, we anticipate it will mostly be large battery storage. I am proud to say that Nova Scotia is home to truly world-class research on battery storage. We have exciting work in the sector right here at home, and we can make it work for us and all ratepayers and Nova Scotians for a clean energy future.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: We are cautiously optimistic to learn that government is putting legislation forward to encourage and streamline more renewable energy projects. We certainly need to encourage companies to invest in renewable energy in our province. We need help getting off coal. We'd like to hit those 2030 targets.

There are two main changes being suggested through these amendments. One, as the minister just mentioned, will enable the procurement of energy storage to support the renewable energy sector, meaning battery storage and other storage tech. We agree there are many valid reasons to invest in this technology and purchase battery storage assets, as they are part of pretty much any decarbonization scenario in any jurisdiction that is looking to grow that industry.

The second change on this and more concerning, these amendments enable the minister to issue contracts and power purchase agreements outside of the RFP process - I think the minister used the word “nimble” - that is certainly true. However, it essentially gives the minister the green light to greenlight any project without outside approval, without competition, without process, and without much oversight. I do believe it skips NSP’s capital approval process, it skips the NSUARB process, and this is concerning. It’s not surprising - it is concerning, but not surprising - as it does align with actions taken by government to consolidate power and decision-making.

We do hope that government will use these new, self-appointed powers with the public interest in mind, with Nova Scotians in mind. We hope that they choose projects that are innovative and add maximum value to both the electrical system but also maximum value to Nova Scotia ratepayers.

We are hopeful these amendments streamline the process, and they lead to better outcomes but yet again concern with stripping away that traditional process.

A couple of things we’d like to hear: a commitment from the minister that environmental assessments and planning will be followed; we’d like to hear about public consultation, if that’s assured; we’d like to hear more about stakeholder engagement. My understanding from learning about this yesterday, I believe, is that Nova Scotia Power wasn’t informed at the time, neither were other stakeholders, so we’d like to see more of that.

Another thing I thought about last night is we’d like to see several applicants be considered outside the private sector, for example, in rural Nova Scotia any municipality, village, town, Indigenous community that hopefully can be part of this development on energy storage.

There may be parameters within the Municipal Government Act that may prohibit the department or NSP working with these municipalities. I’m not sure. I would encourage the minister to work with his colleague in Municipal Affairs to assure that these communities get the same access that private enterprise will do as well.

This is a great opportunity to bring green jobs to our rural communities. As an MLA for a rural riding, I certainly advocate for more collaboration on these kinds of projects. I and we certainly acknowledge the amount of work that goes into this and I’m

looking forward to hearing from my colleagues and looking forward to what Nova Scotians say at Law Amendments Committee. I'll certainly have more to say at third reading.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I am also glad to rise and speak to this bill. We are glad, in the NDP caucus, to see the government recognizing the urgency of our province's 2030 goal for renewable electricity. Our province has some of the dirtiest electricity in the country, and the time to start working on it was yesterday.

Our power utility, Nova Scotia Power, has recently made troubling statements that, resulting from this government's Bill No. 212 in the Fall, Nova Scotia Power will no longer be able to meet the 2030 goals and are unable - or unwilling, not sure - to undertake the capital infrastructure needed. That's very disturbing.

Given those updates in those statements - it's positive to see this government take initiative to build up some of the infrastructure that's needed. Batteries are a good idea, and definitely an important part of the green energy landscape in Nova Scotia, but - and you'll be surprised to hear this, because - I'm just kidding. We've said this several times before. Our caucus believes there is a better way to ensure that we get off coal by 2030, and that is by implementing a performance-based regulatory framework and tying Nova Scotia Power's revenue to their decarbonization efforts. We believe the utility would have sufficient incentives to take on these projects if that was the case.

We do not disagree that our province is not in a good place to meet our targets and that intervention is needed, but we do disagree with part of the approach taken here. We are very concerned about the increasing lack of transparent procurement processes that we see this government using. There are already several precedents, or case studies, that we could look at, in particular in Ontario, about the way to do the RFP process for battery storage. There are ways to do it quickly and nimbly.

We have great people working in our departments on these things and in industry in Nova Scotia. We know we have the expertise. Surely somebody can figure out how to do an RFP process that is nimble, quick, effective, and transparent.

We really think that this is going down the wrong road in terms of giving Executive Council the power to just award contracts. There are smart policy moves that can be taken that don't result in a power grab by Cabinet. This is definitely a worrisome trend on the part of this government.

I will leave my comments there. I look forward to hearing from stakeholders at the Law Amendments Committee, and I too will have more to say in third reading.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables, it will be to close the debate.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Just a quick couple of comments. It's not a power grab for Cabinet. It's a power grab for Nova Scotians. (Applause and booing) I'm not ending it there.

We want to get these storage projects on the system quickly. If there is a project that is coming toward government, my department wants the ability to look at it, develop future RFPs with it as well, but get it on the grid system as quick as we can.

The other member opposite who spoke as well was concerned about permitting and EA assessments. They're all still going to have to follow any other legislation that's still put in place. The key with this is to allow the storage terms to be put into the legislation, allow us to move as quickly as possible, and get it on there, because we have heard that Nova Scotia Power doesn't feel that they can meet some of the standards now because of Bill No. 212.

Well, fine. Government will assist in that, but we're also not blocking Nova Scotia Power. Nova Scotia Power showed interest in this concept a number of months ago when speaking with me and my department. We encourage them to get out there and work with the private sector, work with the government, but it has to be the best process for our grid, and it has to be the best process for our industrial customers, our residential customers, our ratepayers in the end.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move to close second reading of Bill No. 264.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 264.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 256.

Bill No. 256 - Patient Access to Care Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, I rise today on the second reading of an Act to Reduce Administrative Barriers to the Provision of Health Care, also known as the Patient Access to Care Act.

[4:00 p.m.]

The short name of this Act tells you exactly why we have introduced it. Although there are many parts to the Act, it has one ultimate purpose: to increase access to care for Nova Scotians.

This government made the commitment to fix health care in Nova Scotia. We said that we will deliver better health care that all Nova Scotians deserve - no matter what part of the province they call home. We said that we will do whatever it takes. That means we cannot continue to do things the same way. The measures contained in this Act help make health care in Nova Scotia better.

One measure we are implementing is something both doctors and their patients have been asking for for a long, long time. No longer will employers in Nova Scotia be permitted to require a doctor's note when an employee can't come into work because they are sick or hurt. This has been a waste of valuable time for our physicians and nurse practitioners - time they cannot afford to waste. It has also been a waste of time for Nova Scotians whose time would be better spent staying home and getting better - and yes, there are some parameters in place to protect this legislation from abuse.

It is estimated that this one change in legislation could free up to 50,000 hours of physician time. These are hours that can be spent caring for Nova Scotians with chronic illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, mental illness, lung disease, arthritis, kidney disease, and diabetes. These are hours that can be spent caring for Nova Scotians with unexpected illness and injuries who need to see a doctor for help, not a note. Freeing up 50,000 hours is like getting another 25 doctors for Nova Scotians.

We will also be addressing the expectation that sick or injured Nova Scotians get forms filled out by their doctor when it isn't really necessary. We will be reviewing forms that companies and organizations are asking to be filled out, and we will have the power to make them pay the fees for the ones that are truly necessary. Doctors have told us time and time again that they did not go to medical school to do paperwork. This legislation will give them more time to do what they did go to school for, which is helping people live healthier lives.

These changes help free up some time for physicians whom we already have, but we also know we need more doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals practising in Nova Scotia. We cannot train them fast enough here to meet the needs of Nova Scotians, although we are trying. With investments in more nursing seats in the new medical school

campus at Cape Breton University and funding for more people to become CCAs and paramedics, that work continues.

We also need to recruit health care professionals from outside of Nova Scotia. If you are a doctor, nurse or other regulated health care professional who is licensed to practise in Canada, this new legislation says to you that Nova Scotia's doors are wide open. You will not be expected to pay any additional application fees if you are already licensed elsewhere in Canada. This is a change that has come directly from input from health care professionals.

If you are a doctor, a nurse, a pharmacist, an audiologist, a chiropractor, dentist, dietitian, medical lab technologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, respiratory therapist, paramedic, psychologist - I won't list all 21 of our regulated professionals - you are, indeed, welcome in Nova Scotia if you are already licensed to practise in Canada. Your application to practise in Nova Scotia will now be processed within five business days under the rules of this new Act. This means that you can get to work faster helping Nova Scotians.

This legislation also makes it easier for our regulators and the province to open the door for health care professionals licensed outside of Canada. Like we recently saw, the College of Nursing announced that they are making it easier for nurses from the United States, the Philippines, India, Nigeria, Australia, and New Zealand to come and work in Nova Scotia. The College of Physicians and Surgeons made a similar announcement for physicians licensed in the United States. Our regulators are our partners and we'll continue to work with them to ensure that Nova Scotians get the health care they need.

Colleges did not see the bill before it was introduced to the House, but this is not unusual for any bill. However, this bill was built on the long-standing relationships, collaboration, and feedback from the experts who run our health care regulatory bodies.

We are going to be able to update health care professionals' scopes of practice much more quickly when they expand their skills, or the needs of Nova Scotians change. This bill gives government the ability to implement more decisions about scope of practice through an Order in Council but indicates a consultation with the appropriate colleges is necessary. We are stronger when we work together. Scope of practice work has been done in the past with our partners at the colleges and we will continue to do so. This government and our health care regulators have the same mandate - the public good.

Better access to health care serves the public good - doing what it takes to fix health care that has been overlooked for far too long. We may have some cracks in our foundation, but our bones are strong. We have truly exceptional health care workers in this province. We thank them. We thank them just as we did earlier this week when we announced a bonus for 55,000 health care workers in our province. We are working on other things that they have told us about. Better work-life balance is a big one.

Getting them the right equipment and new technology. The Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment is working with our partners in long-term care, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, and the IWK to recruit health care workers from places like Nigeria, Australia, Jordan, Israel, the Philippines, India, the United Kingdom, and beyond. We recently announced that a trip to a refugee camp in Kenya resulted in conditional offers for 65 continuing care assistants who will soon make Nova Scotia their home.

The Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment staff have recruiting trips planned closer to home as well - within Canada and the United States. This Act will help them in their recruitment efforts.

Fixing health care is a huge puzzle. There are thousands of pieces, but every piece counts. The Patient Access to Care Act fills in some of those empty spots on the puzzle board. We are going full speed ahead and we will not stop until the puzzle is complete. Nova Scotians have told us to do more and to do it faster. The measures in the Patient Access to Care Act will help us do just that.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The name of this bill is the Patient Access to Care Act. I want to talk about the actual title - Patient Access to Care Act.

First of all, I appreciated getting a peek at this earlier this week, and the job that her staff did explaining it. We had some questions. The minister knows how competent her staff is. They did a great job on it. I want to just thank them for that.

One of the things that the minister said was we're stronger when we work together. I agree with that, but the proof is in the pudding. What we heard from the clinicians in the South End in Halifax, and what we heard from the clinicians at the Spryfield Family Medical Centre in my own community, is that Nova Scotia Health Authority is not working with them. It is, in fact, working against them. They are putting demands on them that are restricting patient access.

What does that mean? It means that we have family doctors who are stretched to the limit and who can no longer take on any more patients. They're told that if they want any relief - and this is something that hasn't been said on the floor from the government.

Yesterday in Question Period, I asked the Minister of Health and Wellness - and she gave a fantastic answer on this. At the time she gave the answer, the Premier yelled something over at me. When I said that you're asking our family doctors to do more - and part of that is to take on another 800 to 1,000 patients even though they're stretched thin - he said, you're right.

You can't have it one way and say that you're listening and helping with access to patient care, and on the other hand put such high demands on our health care professionals that they'd rather shut down. They would rather shut their practice than continue on because they are so stressed.

Some of the things that they are not talking about is where those doctors are going. Some of those doctors are retiring. Some of them are leaving for other professions. They'll say that instead of staying within the health care system, they've chosen to leave to do something else. When you have discussions with those doctors, they're taking on extremely stressful positions - or you would think - but those positions are actually less stressful than the ones that they are in.

I recently went to Cape Breton, for example, and I sat down with a collaborative care centre in Cape Breton. I spoke to the doctor, the nurses, and the health care professionals. It was a husband-and-wife team, and I asked them about access to patient care. The wife said, I spend more time fighting with, arguing with, on the phone with the Nova Scotia Health Authority than anything else I do - it consumes my entire day. That is impacting Nova Scotians' access to health care. That individual could be working on the front line helping patients. Instead, she's on the phone 24/7 - her words, not mine - trying to find resources, doing paperwork, and dealing with issues from the Nova Scotia Health Authority over and over. That's not patient access to care - it's not. It really isn't.

We use numbers all the time. That's one thing that government is good at. They'll say there's X amount of this and X amount of that. This is something I'm going to bring up in Estimates, so I'm going to give the minister a sneak peek on this one. The number of nurses in our health care system has a direct impact on access to health care or patient care. It absolutely does.

I sat down with the Nova Scotia Nurses Union a couple of weeks ago, and I asked them how many nurses were in the health care system. The response wasn't what you thought it was. It wasn't, I think it's just over - the minister can correct me if I'm wrong - 9,000 nurses in the health care system. What I was told was it depends. What does that mean? Well, how many full-time nurses are there? How many part-time nurses are there? How many nurses are not on the front line, but actually working on policy? They call them policy nurses. How many nurses are in management roles?

Believe it or not, what the head of the Nova Scotia Nurses Union told me is that if you pay your licensing fee every year - whether you're on the front line or not - you're considered a nurse in the Nova Scotia health care system. So somebody like Janet Hazelton, who hasn't been on front line for decades, is considered a nurse in the system.

Travel nurses who are not actually working in this province - and this is something everybody should be listening to because it's important - but are paying their licensing fee in Nova Scotia are considered nurses in the health care system. Does that make sense?

Someone who hasn't been here for over a year, hasn't stepped foot in a hospital in Nova Scotia for over a year, but pays their \$600 licensing fee is considered a nurse in Nova Scotia. I asked, how do we get to those numbers? How do we dig in and see how many nurses we actually need, how many are working here, how many are part-time?

[4:15 p.m.]

We know, from the Nova Scotia Nurses Union, more nurses now are going from full-time to part-time than ever before because of the stress they're facing. A good friend of mine who is a full-time nurse at the QEII, after 15 years, left and went part-time to the IWK, which was considered, by a lot of nurses, Shangri-La. Those are their words, not mine. Going from the QEII to the IWK, the working conditions are different, and a lot of nurses strive to get over to the IWK. She was so stressed out over there that she left. The nurses union told us that same thing.

I just wanted to give a little bit of that to the minister. I don't know if she has those numbers offhand. I would like to see how many nurses are actually working front line right now in the health care system of the almost 10,000 nurses who are in the system. How many of them day to day, week to week, month to month, are actually working in the system. How many are doing policy? How many are full-time? How many are part-time? How many are actually travel nurses outside of this province? How many are just paying their licensing fee to keep their licence? How many are we losing?

I can tell you this: I spoke to the head of the union for the paramedics. We had 133 paramedics out of 900 leave last year for non-retirement issues. They are on track for 160 to 180 this year to leave this year for non-retirement issues.

There is nothing in that budget that was released today, which is More Healthcare, Faster. There is nothing in that budget for paramedics - nothing, not a dime, not a drop, nothing.

I'm also interested to understand, where we talk about patient access to care, one of the things this government has done, which I think is good, is the retention bonuses. We're seeing that right across the country, where we're getting retention bonuses, the provinces are giving retention bonuses. I would like to know how they decided the value of each position, how they decided who was worth five grand, who was worth ten grand, and who was worth zero dollars. There's a lot of people in the health care system who are getting zero dollars. There are a lot of people in that health care system who are getting \$500, \$1,000, \$2,000.

Women on maternity leave and individuals who are sick, people who are injured on the job are not getting bonuses. I have a litany of emails - big word of the day for me, litany. I probably have about 50 emails now from health care workers, and counting, in the last day, saying: Why not me? Why am I not getting it?

I got an email from somebody who pilots the LifeFlight, the helicopter, saying: I guess I'm not worth anything, I'm barely worth anything. Right? It doesn't make sense.

To be honest with you, I speak to a lot of people - a lot of respect for the current Minister of Health and Wellness and the work she does but I don't think there is an actual plan. That's part of the problem right now is that they're just throwing money out left and right, saying that they're going to give patients better access but there's no actual plan.

I'll give you another example. I attended the announcement at Saint Mary's University for almost \$40 million. The V.P. of Saint Mary's University came out in the media and said, well, we didn't expect it, it was unexpected, we didn't know we were getting the money, I guess we're going to have to create a program. Where did the money come from? Literally, the V.P. of Saint Mary's University came out and said, in the media, they were not expecting this money. They just got a call saying: Hey, set up a time, set up a place, we're going to give you \$40 million for a program. They were like: What in the bloody blue blazes is happening here?

They did a great job, as Saint Mary's does. They got it together, created a program. When asked if there was a need or a want or pressure for a health care data analyst, or whatever the position is - forgive me for not knowing it off the top of my head - they said no, no demand. Maybe this program will create one.

Again, that money, the \$40 million, or \$34 million, could have been used for better patient access. Instead, it was given to a university that had no idea they were getting it, for a program they had no idea how they were going to design it - my words, not theirs.

I could tell you I was at the St. Francis Xavier University one. That was just as well attended. I think they were expecting the money in the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government building. It was great to see, a great, nice building there at St. F.X. In that one-week spending period, over \$100 million was given out.

When people asked me, is it going to help me get a family doctor? I said no, it's not. Is it going to help me get more access to a nurse practitioner? No. Will I be able to get those surgeries that they promised, the 24/7 surgeries? No.

This lady in my community, Crystal - and I can use her as an example because we've talked about it. It's been in the media, where she has an illness where she needs surgery. She had to leave the country to get that surgery. She has a right to health care like every Nova Scotian in this province. She has a right to access affordable health care, quick and on time.

You know what she has to do? She has to sue. She's suing the Nova Scotia Health Authority and Nova Scotia Health for the procedure. And you know what their response was? You know what their response was for a former teacher who has an illness that's

keeping her off her feet, and she's unable to take care of her children? You know what the response from the Department of Health was? You sue us, we're suing you back.

That was the response. I saw the letter. It said: We dare you to sue us. You sue us, we're going to sue you for even more money and for all our expenses. Is that how the Nova Scotia Health Authority and the Department of Health and Wellness is supposed to work? Is that access to health care? Is that compassion? It's not. So she calls me in tears. What do I do? Am I responsible? I said: Eff it. Keep going. Don't stop fighting.

One of the things I will say - it's been a pet peeve of mine for a long time, and I applaud the Minister for doing this - is those bloody doctor's notes. Thank you. Getting rid of those doctor's notes one of the best things you can do. Do you know how deeply embarrassing it is, how private it is, to have to go to your doctor to get a doctor's note for something? And then have to go back to work and present - and doctors hate it. They absolutely hate it.

That's a Health and Wellness Minister that I guarantee you - I guarantee you - and correct me if I'm wrong, but I bet you heard about it in those public consultations. And it's just common sense, right? Common sense. Great that we got rid of those. Can I give you a but? But in order to get those - in the past, to get a doctor's note, you needed to obviously go see a doctor, right? Or when I worked at the phone company in Scotia Square, what they would do is they would send us down to the walk-in clinic. And they'd say, go get a note from the walk-in clinic. This was the note, and I will table it. This was on the walk-in clinic at Scotia Square today: We are full for today and unable to take any more patients. No exceptions.

This has been on that walk-in clinic door, and the one in Spryfield, and the one, I bet you, in almost every one of your communities, for weeks, months. There are no walk-in clinics folks. The days of walk-in clinics are over. They're over. And one of the issues is that physicians who work at the walk-in clinics, did you know they get paid less than a family doctor to see a patient?

Why would you be a walk-in clinic physician? That was not addressed in this budget, therefore . . . (Interruption) Are they going to get paid more? Okay. Just write down where I'm wrong. Correct me. That was one of the biggest complaints that we heard was, why would I want to work at a walk-in clinic when I'm getting paid less?

So one of the things that frustrates me the most is when I stand here and I hear the Premier of Nova Scotia stand up, who no doubt has a family doctor. No doubt. I would bet anything that that man has a family doctor. And you know what he says? You don't have a family doctor, go to a walk-in clinic, go to the emergency room, call VirtualCareNS.

I will guarantee you the Premier of Nova Scotia has not been in a walk-in clinic in years. Decades probably, if ever. When is the last time he had to go to an emergency room?

Not as the Premier of Nova Scotia, but as a Nova Scotian. When is the last time the Premier of Nova Scotia had to call virtual care for an issue? Because if it was recently, over the last two years, that would not be his response when we talk about patient access to care. He would know how desperate those situations are.

I will give you a personal example. When I broke my ribs a year and a half ago, I waited for 18 hours in the emergency room. I never got seen. Never got seen. I saw a paramedic, a friend of mine who was coming in and I pulled him aside. He said what are you doing here? I said I'm pretty sure I broke my ribs. He said, how long have you been here? I said 18 hours. He said, go home. He said, you are not going to be seen here. He did a little bit of feeling and he said it seems all right. Your breathing is fine. Go home. I never got seen.

I wonder when the last time - when everybody stands on that side and claps about these investments in health care, I wonder when the last time you actually had to access health care was. One of the things that the minister says and the members of that side say over and over is that there hasn't been investment in the health care system for too long. Well, I think their first budget was a 1 per cent increase in the health care budget - 1 per cent increase.

I would like to ask the Premier: If it's money that's going to fix the health care system, what's the amount, because right now we spend about 55 cents on the dollar. Is it 60 cents? Is it 70 cents? Is it 80 cents? Is it 90 cents? Is it every single tax dollar we have on health care, because over the last two years, since he's been Premier of this province, he has spent more money than any premier before him in a two-year period. I don't need to table your budgets. They've already been tabled. He spent more money over the last two years than any premier before him and everything has gotten worse. Don't believe me?

Walk-in clinics - the worst in the country now. Our COVID-19 response went from the best to the worst. More deaths - hey, take a look. More deaths over the last 18 months than the two years before that combined - facts - double the people on health care. I remember when we were on that side and the Premier was in Opposition, when there were 40,000 people on the Need a Family Practice Registry wait-list and he said the system is in shambles, you've destroyed the system, it's broken. Forty-thousand Nova Scotians are without a family doctor. It can't get worse.

Well, you've added 100,000 people since that time, and it's getting worse and the response isn't one of accountability. It's not about, okay we've spent on things and access to patient care has gotten better. You know what it is? It's, well, I blame the feds, but you can't anymore. They gave you billions of dollars. Blame the municipality. Well, they have nothing to do with health care. I blame the former Liberal government. Well, you spent more money than they did and, in fact, your first budget was only a 1 per cent increase. At some point, as we tell our children, you have to take responsibility for your own actions.

Today they were blaming an NDP government from 2010 and literally nobody's - Gary Burrill - oops, sorry, the member from Halifax Chebucto is the only one left from then and that is because he's a damn good MLA. I mean, it's like us when we were in power. We should have started blaming - I don't know - Joseph Howe, John A. Macdonald. I mean, you guys should start blaming John Savage. You blame everybody.

Here's what we'll do, Mr. Speaker, just to liven up, because I know that the Speaker was saying today about decorum and the attitude in this House. We are going to put a wall of every premier, Liberal and NDP - well, you've got Darrell over there - on this side and every time you want to blame this side for patient access - throw a dart.

Throw a dart because patient access to care has gotten worse under this government. Those are the facts. It's truly factual, and I don't think it's from lack of trying. I don't think it's from lack of trying. We now know that we have fewer doctors, and this bill is supposed to bring in more doctors, yes. We now know that we have doctors retiring hand over fist, and what we're saying is we're going to support bringing new doctors in and make it easier for new doctors to come in . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I've checked and some of the language that the member opposite is using is unparliamentary.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I apologize. The only time I'll use the word "dam" is when I say Williams Lake Dam. I will not use it in a derogatory term. I apologize. I mean, it slipped out. If you're offended by the word "damn," I apologize.

Let's keep going. I just want to say that I do think there are some really good parts to this bill. I really do appreciate - and I think employers are really going to appreciate it, and physicians, and health care experts and individuals are going to appreciate the doctor's note thing. I think it's the right time to do it because 15 per cent of Nova Scotians don't have a doctor, right? Fifteen per cent of Nova Scotians, if they were - I mean, that would be interesting. If 15 per cent of Nova Scotians don't have a family doctor, if they were asked for a doctor's note, where do they get it? Where do they get it? I don't know.

I'm going to tell you - I'm going to tell you this. We talk about patient access to care. They have two years left until their election date. I suspect you guys are going to go a little early, but who am I? Two years left. As I said last year when the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board talked about the Better Pay Cheque Guarantee on the *Todd Veinotte Show*, I said it will never happen. Two years from now, patient access to care. Who here in this House wants to do a friendly wager? Will it be 15 per cent higher or lower? Who wants to take the over/under? I'm going to take the over. I'll give you a five-point spread there,

the minister in charge of housing infrastructure. I'll give you a five-point spread because we see that they have bungled it. They've bungled it.

[4:30 p.m.]

They talk about access to patient care - they bought a hotel against the recommendations of the company they hired who said don't buy it, it doesn't suit your health care needs. They bought it. I didn't see any RFP go out. There's no tender, they just wrote a cheque. There you go. Apparently they don't need to go out now. That's what the minister's saying. He can spend \$40 million of taxpayers' money without any checks and balance because he's the minister. That is what he is saying right there. That's for all Nova Scotians to hear. Your government now, when it comes to access to patient care or anything, can spend any money they want without the checks and balances. Even though every government before them had to, they don't have to anymore.

I'd be interested to know how long the company they purchased it from owned the building. I wonder. Did they potentially attend an AGM? I wonder.

Anyway, I think the minister has done a great job with this bill on reducing the red tape. We do know that there's a lot of red tape, especially with people coming into this province. Hopefully we will see an influx of doctors and health care professionals coming in.

I do like that it wasn't just there is some broader scope to this, and I'm glad that - sometimes when we're talking about these issues, we kind of narrow down and we look at nurses or doctors. I think that it was very intuitive to look at 21 different Acts, right?

It's going to have a big impact, because we know that we don't have enough psychologists or psychiatrists for our universal mental health care, which was promised - two years in, you get one hour, if you're lucky. It takes you about 25 minutes to register. If you're me, that probably takes you about 45 minutes to register, 15 minutes to get in there and speak, and then you're done. So there is no universal mental health care. That's another broken promise. That promise is out the door.

I'd be interested to see what the backlog is. Maybe the minister could tell us a little bit about this, either during this bill or at Estimates - what the backlog is of individuals trying to get into the country.

We know when we're talking about health care professionals coming from other provinces - and I know, listen, your top priority should be Nova Scotia. But we also have to play nice and fair with the other provinces, because we do depend on them for all kinds of different things. We just saw today their comrade-in-arms from New Brunswick upset with announcements. That's fine.

The other thing I'd be interested to know about when it comes to patient access to care is that there's a \$513 million discretionary - or as it used to be called, a slush fund - in the budget - \$513 million. When questioned about it, some of the answers we got were that this could be used for health care, or this could be used for different access.

So you've taken \$513 million of taxpayers' dollars, you put it over to the side here, and you've said, whatever the Premier wants to do with it, he can do with it.

I can tell you where that \$513 million could go. You could be paying tuitions - tuition for health care workers. You could be giving every kid in this province access to a healthy lunch program. You could be doing that instead of driving people on income assistance into deeper and deeper poverty - which they are doing. You could be helping people on income assistance.

I heard the Minister of Community Services talk today about the connection between the departments. I agree, there is a connection between departments, but you can't expect every other department to do the heavy lifting, and that's what's happening. When you don't give people on income assistance any type of money, any type of raise, it can lead to unhealthy outcomes. It really can. I don't get why they don't see this interconnection.

The truth is that statistics show that people who live in poverty are more apt to access health care, and they are patients in the system.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: I'm just wondering, it doesn't appear that the member is speaking to the bill. We were talking about income assistance.

THE SPEAKER: Just to remind the member, let's keep to the bill we're speaking on.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I guess what I'm trying to say - the Minister of Public Works had that figured out from the first time I ever stood up on my feet, didn't you? You're like, don't interrupt. Just let him go.

What I'm trying to say is it's all connected, and I think for too long, governments and parties and people have not interconnected health care. Health care is about education, it's about access to education, it's about access to post-secondary education, it's about access to healthy food, it's about access, and the human right to have a safe, affordable roof over your head. Health care is all connected, and if one of those pieces of the puzzle is

missing, you are going to have to access health care. You are. Come on, people. The statistics are around, they've been around forever. We know this.

[4:45 p.m.]

Looking at the budget, one of the things that really came to mind about patient access to care, and pertains to this bill, it said people living in rural Nova Scotia need more doctors. Absolutely true. You know who needs more doctors? Nova Scotians. Why that line is there is it's a political line. It's dividing this province. We've seen that with the removal of the doctor retention bonus in HRM. Because of that, access to doctors in this capital, in Halifax, has exploded in some communities by 600 per cent, because of a policy they took away, pitting rural Nova Scotia against urban Nova Scotia. It's exactly what they did.

It's a simple solution. More health care, faster. Patient access. They could have implemented and brought back that doctor retention in HRM. Do you know, Mr. Speaker, we're the only capital, major municipality, in this country that no longer has it? Do you know that? It had a direct impact on health care in HRM. I look across, I don't see a lot of HRM MLAs, but the ones who are in HRM should be screaming from the rooftops about this incentive. They should have been screaming from the rooftops. Not a single one of them in HRM stood up on that side of the aisle, and because of that, tens of thousands of Nova Scotians in HRM no longer have access to patient care, to health care. There wasn't a single voice from that side that stood up for their constituents in HRM. Shameful.

There are easy solutions to attach people to health care. There are some easy, low-hanging fruits, and that is definitely one of them. There is a correlation between removing that incentive from HRM, which is one of the first things I will say a rural Premier did. The Premier of Nova Scotia, who is from a rural area, who clearly does not understand HRM and urban cores - clearly does not understand it. One of the first things he did was remove it. And what happened? Doctors stopped coming to HRM.

And you think, well, maybe he made a mistake. Maybe he didn't understand, right? Maybe he'll correct it. He doubled and tripled down on it, refused to bring it back and, in fact, all but said, why? Are you telling me that people in rural Nova Scotia deserve access to family doctors, but people in HRM don't? That they deserve access to health care, but people in HRM don't?

I would argue we're all one, we're all equal, we're all one province. Whether you're Ecum Secum or Meat Cove or Lunenburg or Yarmouth, Whitney Pier, Halifax, maybe not Bedford - just joking - Bedford. We all deserve access to health care. We are all equal. We are all Nova Scotians. And this Premier has decided to draw a divisive line right down the middle when it comes to access to patient care.

So I wonder, when those new doctors come flooding in like they're predicting, where do you think they're going to tell them to go? Are they going to tell them to go to the areas that need it the most? Or are they going to tell them to go to, maybe, the constituencies that they hold? Because if you start looking at investments through all the departments, roads are getting paved and the rinks are getting done and . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Not my roads.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: But mostly, the vast majority of the investments are going into ridings held by blue constituencies - by Progressive Conservatives, by MLAs who are part of the government.

A disproportionate amount, I will say. I wonder where those doctors will go. Where will those doctors be encouraged to go? And some will say, well, we hold more constituencies. But if you look at a percentage, the percentage of resources vastly outweigh the percentage of seats they hold.

I was only going to speak for five minutes. I really was, but I think it's important. I think this is important. This is a government that was elected on health care. Who said he would fix health care immediately, and then got elected and was like: Got no ideas, it's going to take a little longer than I thought. And then when all the numbers tanked, he said, well, I said it would get worse before it got better. Access to patient care would get worse before it got better.

I'm never one for studying. I wasn't a good - if you asked me to do research and study, I wasn't good at it. But I did a little bit of studying and research on patient access to care, and the words of people. I looked at the debates and the interviews that the Premier did when he was in opposition leading up and into the election. Never once did he say patient access to care would get worse. Never once did he say it will get worse before it gets better. He said it will get better immediately.

I guess one of the questions I will have for - we know the Premier will no longer answer questions in Question Period, so I guess we'll throw it out to whoever on that side wants to answer it. One of the questions that I will have for them is - well, I mean, the truth is that my dealings with the Minister of Health and Wellness, I don't think there's anything you can stump her with.

AN HON. MEMBER: Hear, hear. Hear, hear.

AN HON. MEMBER: Stop sucking up.

AN HON. MEMBER: For once, he's right. For once.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What I will say is that I will have questions. I will have questions around their priorities. I will have questions around their plan. They did release a plan on access and how they're going to do it. There's a lot of buzz words. There were no concrete details or plan. I've had people look at it and they're like, well this is just - it looks like it was created by someone who was in public relations.

There was no - it just said things like we're going to do access to patient care, but the problem is that we need a plan, and if you're going to spend - last time during the last budget, every time we stood up and said anything, they would yell back at us 13 billion, 13 billion, and they already started with the six-and-a-half. Six-and-a-half billion, six-and-a-half billion. Well, I will challenge you, each and every one of you who said it - and you all said it - did that \$13 billion you spent last year give you better access to patient care and health care? No, it did not. You can say yes, but the numbers don't lie.

More people cannot access health care. Try calling VirtualCareNS. If you're lucky to get through - and if you get through, you're waiting. I just tabled walk-in clinics closed right across the province. You go down to the Eastern Shore, the emergency room is closed 24/7 pretty much. Every time - there are more emergency room closures under this government than there have ever been. Annapolis - don't even get me talking about Annapolis.

Just to clear up a few things before I sit down, I'm going to clear up some speaking points, talking points that this government uses. I saw the video. Premier picked up the phone and he said: You're a nurse? We're going to hire you. You're going to give us better access to care. We're going to hire every nurse. And he had the little video. You saw that; I think you shared it. Here's the funny part. There's always been a standing offer for every graduating nurse in this province. They just politicized it. There's a reason why the year before, under the previous government, more nurses were hired than the first year they were in power: because there was a standing offer. There is a standing offer, and there's been a standing offer for every health care professional who graduates from this province to work right here in Nova Scotia.

Everybody knows that, and the fact of the matter is I don't know how many times - I've got two microphones on here - how many times we met with graduating health care students and doctors, pre-med doctors before they graduated. We'd have them in, we'd talk to them, they'd meet with the premier of the day. All that stuff was going on, but we didn't do a video saying: I'm going to give you better access to health care. Look, I just picked up my phone and called a doctor right now. Should have done a video.

What's that? (Interruption) The South End? Hmm.

And it doesn't always work, you know. I just see a note here on my desk that 14 nurses from the south end of southern Africa couldn't get an answer from the Nova Scotia Health Authority. Couldn't get an answer, so guess what happened? Went to P.E.I. They

got an answer. You know, I've had the privilege to do this for a while, and I've spoken to a lot of people. I was just down in Clare the other day, or Meteghan - it's my accent, whatever.

Meteghan is one of the most beautiful places on Earth, by the way. Absolutely stunning. Did you know they're the only place in Nova Scotia that has an abundance of family doctors? Did you know that? It's because of the way they treat them. It's because of the resources they give them. It's because of the groundwork and the short-, medium-, and long-term plan that was put in place to make sure that these doctors were attracted, they were successful, and when they graduated, they had a place to go.

How can beautiful Clare get it right? I would argue that the current MLA who has done a fantastic job, who was a councillor - before I get the eye rolls and the groans over there - who was a councillor for a long time and helped implement the program that's in there today where the municipality works hand in hand and provides with - I shouldn't actually say that because now they're going to start blaming the municipalities. Why did I even bring that up? Just another long list of excuses of why health care is not getting better.

I would say: Take a moment, go down there, listen to them. The doctors are happy. The health care professionals are happy. They're smiling ear to ear. They have an abundance of family doctors. They are saying to them, we'll take you, but you know.

Instead of just throwing the money around, instead of just chucking it at the wall and seeing what sticks, have a plan. Have a plan that's created by health care professionals because they know how and what patients need to access health care. Mr. Speaker, I know you have a trade, I forget which trade it is (Interruption) - pipefitting. I thought you had a different trade. I'm sure there's some plumbers and electricians and carpenters over on that side and this side. It would be like hiring me to fix your roof. I could do it, but I'm not going to guarantee that it's not going to leak. It would be like hiring me to teach a history class - not going to happen. That would be interesting. I could talk, but I couldn't talk history.

We just need to have a plan. Sometimes people get at me and say, why are you being nice about this, or why are you being nice about that? I do think the minister is working her tail off. I do think she has been there 24/7. She has a ton of health care experience. But I don't think there is a plan coming from One Government Place, and that's where it all starts and ends. I think the plan is to get re-elected, and the proof is in the pudding - all the health care announcements, all the big announcements. Everything is going to come to maturity in 2025.

Here's what's going to happen in 2025, folks: The vast majority of the promises around health care, access by patients to health care and all the promises - I'm wrapping it up - that this government has made will not come to fruition. The campaign slogan will be something like: Keep us going, keep going on the same track, need more time. We're

almost there. Don't stop the plan now. Even though the health care access has gotten worse, the investments are there, and you need us to continue along the same plan.

That's what they're going to say. That's what they're going to do. It's not right because the investments aren't to make the health care system better, for the most part - they're to get re-elected.

I did lay a few questions out there. I didn't think I was going to speak for 50 minutes. I do want to say that I look forward to working with the Health and Wellness Minister. I do actually look forward to learning from the Health and Wellness Minister, as I have learned from a lot of people across this province. I do look forward to learning from her and listening to her and working with her, as the new and improved MLA from Halifax Atlantic. (Interruption)

I'm Zen now. I took the Minister of Economic Development's Zen.

I do look forward to it. I'll end with this . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Oh, thank God.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm going 10 minutes now. (Interruption) You want to talk about Dartmouth South. Let's talk about Dartmouth South. Their representation compared to Dartmouth North - whoa! I'm joking, both are fantastic.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I remind the member to speak to the bill at hand.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I am going to end with this, and I'm going to let a little something out of the bag, and I hope the member doesn't kill me. There's a way to do this collaboratively. There's a way to do this when ideas come forward so that we work together.

I'm going to give you an example of when we were in government and now when you're in government. It started with Dave Wilson from Sackville, who brought forward an idea around PTSD support for paramedics. He was in Opposition. Then-Premier Stephen McNeil sat down with him. The Minister of Health and Wellness, and the Minister of Labour and Advanced Education sat down with him. They talked about it, and they implemented it. It worked, because a good idea is a good idea no matter where it comes from.

There was an idea I had in government that never came to fruition. I approached the now-Minister of the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, the member for Eastern Passage. I said, there's an idea called Capable - which we just had kids from Johns Hopkins

University here today. Capable was created by students from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. It was a way of treating seniors differently. I brought it to the minister. We had a conversation, and I walked away. Two things I thought about when I walked away that day. I thought, wow, she actually listened. I was like, she was listening. She was asking me questions. She was actually trying to understand this. Then I thought, it's not going to happen. Those are the two things that I thought.

[5:00 p.m.]

Lo and behold, I get a phone call. It happened, because what she said - a good idea is a good idea. Instead of being confrontational when it comes to health care - we have good ideas on this side, they have good ideas on that side. You have good ideas. So let's all work together and get this done.

Thank you for the 53 minutes. I look forward to working with, and talking, and learning from the minister and questioning you. I hope that we are able to keep a respectful and cordial relationship. I will certainly do my best to make sure that happens.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm very happy to stand up and speak for a very few minutes to this bill. I want to start with the good stuff, of course, because I'm a positive person. I like to look for the positives, and I like to present ideas. I always make this joke - but I might as well make it again - that I like to think of our party as the proposition, not the Opposition.

One of the things that we proposed several years ago when I was first elected was eliminating sick notes. I am so happy that this day has finally come - eliminating sick notes. The numbers that the minister used around this are very compelling: 50,000 physician hours, the equivalent of 25 physicians. It's incredible. Why have we not done it until now? It's wonderful that we're doing it. If the Premier happens to be watching - sorry. I just want to remind the Premier that we have some great ideas over here, and we're always willing to share them.

One of the other things I'm really happy to see is the ability to limit or affect the forms that are necessary from physicians for different organizations. If the minister is looking for ideas of another organization that could limit their forms and their requirements, she only needs to look to her left, to the Minister of Community Services. The Department of Community Services has a lot of forms that are ornery - that are unnecessary for many people whose health situations are not going to change very much. They are constantly needing to do annual reviews proving that they've got one condition or another. It would be great if we could look at getting rid of those forms.

Back to the negative part of my speech. I'm sorry, that was a very quick positive part. We are deeply concerned about this bill and the fact that virtually no one was consulted on the content of the bill. None of the regulators were consulted on the content of the bill. This is highly concerning.

We have some very big concerns about the tendency of this government to consolidate decision-making power away from independent experts and inside Cabinet. I mentioned this in my earlier debate on the Electricity Act. Here we see it again. This Cabinet, boy oh boy, has an awful lot of power, and it's getting more and more power every day. It's really worrying.

We know that we need to remove unnecessary barriers to health care workers' ability to work in Nova Scotia and we want to see that happen. We also know that we need to do it safely and with the guidance of experts. The amendments in this bill remove the ability for health regulators in Nova Scotia to impose additional training, experience, or assessments as conditions for licensure or registration, even if they're required for safety.

The minister has mentioned - and the bill briefing says - that consultation with experts will happen. Ultimately, we know that the bill itself and the way that it's written right now allows for those consultations to actually not happen.

We've heard alarm bells from doctors, social workers, and from other people who work in health regulation. I'm really looking forward to the Law Amendments Committee so that we can hear from those folks at the regulatory bodies. They were not consulted, and they will probably have much to say at the Law Amendments Committee.

That is all I'm going to say for now. Thank you very much.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the members opposite for their very thoughtful and brief comments. I appreciate the feedback and there will be more to say as the bill moves through the House.

I move to close second reading of Bill No. 256.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 256.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 269.

Bill No. 269 - Construction Projects Labour Relations Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 269 - an Act to Amend Chapter 18 of the Acts of 2016, the Construction Projects Labour Relations Act (amended) now be read a second time.

As a government, we are committed to helping private companies and investors reach the completion of projects on schedule. We know this keeps Nova Scotia's economy growing. It helps important infrastructure projects reach completion and it provides hard-working Nova Scotians with steady, reliable employment.

At the time when this Act was enacted, the potential for hydrogen production facilities in Nova Scotia was not yet realized. This government sees its potential. We are positioning Nova Scotia as a leader in green hydrogen production. We are exploring all scenarios where hydrogen can advance development of our renewable resources, all scenarios where we can safely supply the demand for cleaner energy and where we can build Nova Scotia's green economy.

An important way to keep that green economy growing is by making sure these types of megaprojects can continue uninterrupted and to completion. This is one part of the greater vision for this province. Through the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act, our goal is for 80 per cent of Nova Scotia's energy to be supplied by renewable energy by 2030.

Renewable energy sources such as wind, tidal, and solar are our future. Nova Scotia's climate plan for clean growth is leading the province to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, prepare for climate change impacts, and capitalize on low-carbon economic opportunities. Moving away from coal and toward a clean, reliable, and efficient electricity system is essential if we are to meet our greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets.

As we move away from fossil fuels for home heating and transportation, we need to know that the electricity that is being used instead has come from a renewal source and is not still contributing to climate change.

A clean electricity system is also important to advance our standing in the clean economy. Having a reliable and clean source of electricity like green hydrogen is important

to help Nova Scotia respond to the demand for alternative sources of energy, because it is our climate. It's our future.

The purpose of the Construction Projects Labour Relations Act is to allow parties involved in a specific construction project to enter into a collective agreement for the life of the project. Amendments to the Construction Projects Labour Relations Act will broaden the legislation to include large-scale green hydrogen production facilities as Nova Scotia transitions to green renewable energy.

Under the Construction Projects Labour Relations Act, unionized contractors and unions enter into a collective agreement for the construction project, safeguarding it from work stoppages during the life of the project. We have consulted with community partners, unions, open shop, and construction associations in developing the proposed amendments. Large-scale projects like green hydrogen production facilities provide significant investment, economic activity, and jobs for our province. These amendments will support a timely completion of large-scale green hydrogen projects in Nova Scotia.

With that, I look forward to hearing comments and responses from my colleagues and members of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I appreciate the amendments being made to the bill that I originally brought into the House back in - I was going to say 1916, but I haven't been here that long - 2016. (Laughter) Including green hydrogen production facilities in the Construction Projects Labour Relations Act will allow associated infrastructure projects to move forward with less interruption. I think we all want that.

I should say that I do have a couple of concerns. In general, we are in favour of this bill, but there are a couple of things I do want to mention to the minister. Very few initiatives have been put forward by the government so far on the environment and our concern is about aiding in reducing emissions.

Generally, this bill is administrative, and we don't have a problem with that, but I will also raise an issue that was raised with me in my final months on the government side, when I was the minister responsible for the Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act. It was with some women's groups from the Indigenous community who were very concerned about the issue of work camps, which I had not heard of before.

Often on these large megaprojects, there are work camps that develop, and what happens is that human trafficking ensues. It becomes a risk for women - and sometimes young men too, but generally women - in those areas. I am just going to raise that issue with the government for now. I do think they need to reach out to the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association, talk to them about this, and see what steps we can take to make sure

that we are not putting the women and young people of our province at risk because of megaprojects. Thank you.

[5:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm going to be brief. There are a few things I want to say about this bill, and that's just, for one, over the past while we've seen this government has thrown our ability to meet climate targets, if we have any, at times for a loop. Nova Scotians have many questions about the hydrogen megaprojects that this government is speeding through approvals. If green hydrogen megaprojects are going to be a part of our renewable energy mix, they need to be done safely, without the use of fossil fuels, for local use, and in partnership with trades, councils, and labour representatives.

The department's staff said that labour representatives were consulted on this bill, and we were glad to hear about that. I look forward to hearing from those representatives their thoughts on this bill as we go towards Law Amendments, and with that I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Mr. Speaker, thank you to the members for sharing their comments, and if I did say 2019, and not 2016, I apologize for that mistake. To the member for Bedford Basin, I do appreciate the concern bringing it forward around work camps. I'm definitely going to take that back to the department and look into it further, especially where the member had mentioned community partners to take this to, we will definitely follow up on that. It's important that we do that.

To the member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier, thank you, and of course safety is going to be a top concern. It is for our department and it will be on these particular work sites as well. So the member knows that safety is a priority, we'll make sure that is echoed through the work that is going to be completed.

With those remarks, Mr. Speaker, I move to close debate on Bill No. 269.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 269. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. (Applause)

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 263.

Bill No. 263 - Public Utilities Act. (amended)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 263 be now read a second time.

I want to start by saying that we've always made our position crystal clear: Nova Scotians deserve reliable, clean electricity at an affordable price. Last month, our ratepayers did not get that. The URAB approved a power rate increase at a time when Nova Scotians are struggling to make ends meet. If people are going to pay more, they should at least get reliable service, but they are not. There are performance standards that Nova Scotia Power has to meet. No more than two non-storm outages per year. They haven't been meeting that standard. Yes, they've been fined for it but the penalties have only been hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In 2021, Mr. Speaker, the fine was \$250,000, a drop in the bucket when you consider their profits. And yet, outage performance continues to trend worse, not better. This is unacceptable. Clearly, the current fines aren't heavy enough to incent the utility to perform at a better rate, so we're increasing the performance penalty. The current maximum \$1 million penalty is going up to \$25 million per year, and we'll be setting performance standards in the regulations where those fines will apply.

Further, Mr. Speaker, for some standards we'll also set a specific amount of penalty or a minimum amount. This gives the UARB the tools it needs to make Nova Scotia Power more accountable for things like outages and reliability. Let me be clear: It's my hope the URAB never has to put the penalty onto them, but also, we need to make sure that they are accountable. My hope is that the service meets the needs of our ratepayers, a level of service that doesn't trigger penalties, but if penalties are in order, they will come directly from the utility's profit, not the pockets of ratepayers.

In fact, the proceeds from some penalties will be going directly to a new fund. Customers who are most affected by some of these outages will be compensated.

Further regulations will outline the deals about how this fund will be managed. These amendments are designed to give Nova Scotians more reliable service, Mr. Speaker, because they deserve it.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: This is essentially one clause increasing maximum annual penalties from \$1 million to \$25 million for non-compliance performance standards. This increase in penalties derives from a past session that we had in here. We all discussed it, or I discussed it with the minister and debated it. Now Nova Scotia Power can be penalized for a wider scope on a number of things over categories such as weather, reliability, and customer service.

This change will certainly allow the current government and the minister to make regulations and create a fund that will be administered by Nova Scotia Power, and it would hold penalties that are owed and could be administered back to customers.

We are certainly supportive of this. I believe we asked for an increase in these penalties, and I appreciate that. I guess our concern, and I wouldn't dare use the wording "power grab," but I would say it is a further consolidation of power, and that's a bit concerning.

The mechanism to do this hasn't been fleshed out, either. It hasn't been decided and we certainly would want a lot more information on that process.

Another question that comes to mind: What are the criteria to determine which customers were most affected? So we have a number of questions. Overall, we are supportive. We're concerned about that consolidation of power once again, but I look forward to hearing what my colleagues have to say, what Nova Scotians have to say at Law Amendments Committee. I'll speak more to this at third reading.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, I am glad to rise and speak to this bill. We have heard from Nova Scotians who are concerned about the reliability of the Nova Scotia Power grid and experiencing frequent outages, and we are glad to see this initiative taken to hold Nova Scotia Power accountable to provide more reliable service.

Our caucus has been talking about performance-based regulation for some time. We introduced a bill last year that would have created a true performance-based regulation framework. I want to go over some of the key differences between that approach and the one that this bill basically outlines.

In a performance-based regulation framework, the actual returns of Nova Scotia Power would be restricted, based on their compliance with performance standards. We have seen how administrative penalties have failed to incentivise compliance in recent years. We know that penalties levied in recent years have not come anywhere near the \$1 million cap, so we're not optimistic that expanding the cap to \$25 million is going to be much more impactful.

The government introduced legislation in the Fall that created a new performance regulation standard to ensure reliability but only for large-scale industry, so it seems like maybe that's who the Premier's government is looking to protect at this point, Mr. Speaker, not everyday Nova Scotians who really have much disruption to their lives and to their safety when the power goes out.

There are no performance standards related to decarbonization or affordability. These are two very important issues that are on Nova Scotians' minds right now, and this is not the true performance-based regulation system that is needed to repair our province's utility regulation. It does not get to the core of the issues facing Nova Scotians.

We look forward to hearing from stakeholders and discussing this further at Law Amendments Committee.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I thank the members opposite for the comments and I move to close debate on the bill.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 263.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, that concludes government business for the day. (Interruption) All kinds of happy folks in here tonight.

I move that the House do now rise to meet again on Friday, March 24th - let's see if everyone's happy again - between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. I know.

Following the Daily Routine and Question Period, we will move directly into the long-awaited Committee of the Whole on Supply to deal with Budget Estimates.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the House rise to meet again on Friday, March 24th, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We stand adjourned until 9:00 a.m. tomorrow morning.

[The House rose at 5:25 p.m.]